

Growth through Chaos

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As they return from the Land of Waves, Team 7 fall into somewhere far more chaotic and divided than the Ninja World. Follow Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke and Kakashi, after they find themselves in the World of the One Piece. Growing through a Special brand of Chaos across trials, battles, training and more as members of the Straw Hat Pirates on the Grand Line. (LuffyxNami, Kakashi x Robin)

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The Crucial Wish

Introduction: As they return from the Land of Waves, Team 7 fall into somewhere far more chaotic and divided than the Ninja World. Follow Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke and Kakashi, after they find themselves in the World of the One Piece. Growing through a Special brand of Chaos across trials, battles, training and more as members of the Straw Hat Pirates on the Grand Line.

Chapter 1:

The Crucial Wish.

Author's Note: I was inspired to write this story by the fanfics "Coby's Choice," and "Naruto: The Angelic Swordsman." with a few changes of my own. As Team 7 are travelling home to the Leaf Village after saving the Land of Waves, a single choice, borrowed from a recent Naruto OVA: The Three Wishes, changes everything.

What happens to Team 7 will lead to major changes to their lives and new impacts on whomever they meet. The storylines and plot will not change too heavily, prior to a certain War declaration. Although some distinct choices from the characters will lead to smaller changes, gradual impacts, and more that will evolve the characters and events far down the road.

Let's see how it all starts, from a few crucial choices.

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

"" *Inner thoughts* " "=images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please, Read and Review

"Come on Sensei! This mission turned out fine, ye know! And the next one has to be an even better one. And with a bigger adventure! We all got stronger, and we saved a whole Island, believe it! You gotta get us another C-rank, or something even higher! Ya Know!" Uzumaki Naruto exclaimed to his teacher.

Team 7 were travelling home at a relaxing, smooth pace. Leaving the Land of Waves behind them and returning home after the completion of their first C-rank Mission. As they strolled near a river connected to the ocean, Uchiha Sasuke let out a soft grunt. Agreeing with his attention-needy teammate but unwilling to admit it.

Haruno Sakura did not share his sentiment. "Naruto! This mission wasn't even supposed to be this dangerous in the first place. Sasuke almost died from that ninja Haku, and we had to rescue Kakashi-sensei from Zabuza's water prison! It would be better if we avoided dangerous situations like that until we grow much stronger."

"Oh, come on Sakura! D-ranks are more boring than listening to Iruka-sensei! I don't wanna go back to babysitting or chasing that crazy cat! We got a lot better on this one than anything we did on those chores! Right, Kakashi-sensei?"

Three sets of eyes trained on the tallest figure in the group. The legendary Copy-nin Hatake Kakashi. Veteran Ninja. Former ANBU. The Man with a Thousand Jutsu. With his single eye trained on a steamy passage in his favorite book, Icha-Icha Paradise.

Still, the man wasn't absent-minded. "No. Sorry Naruto We... probably won't take another C-rank for quite some time."

"WHAAAAATTT!" Two of the genin shouted. While one of them huffed in silent frustration.

"But Sensei! None Of Us Wanna Go Back To Lame Kid's Stuff! Come On! You're Just Saying That Because You Like Being Late

And Lazy All The Time! That ain't cool, ya know!" Naruto cried, pointing a first straight at his sensei.

'He's got a good point,' Uchiha Sasuke silently agreed. 'He's still a loser, but he's right. My Sharingan finally awakened during that fight with Haku. And my chakra control grew during those tree exercises. But...'

"Grrrr," the avenger growled quietly, curling one hand in a fist. 'But I froze up when we first encountered Zabuza. His sheer presence... his Killing Intent had me trembling with fear. With doubt.' In his mind, *a silhouette materialized of somebody else with sharingan eyes*. "He. Will definitely have more when I finally face him. I need to find more challenges and dangers to improve.'

Sakura spoke up. "Naruto. What if we run into any rouge ninja like Zabuza again? Plus... after finding out what kind of ninja he was, and what some villages make their Ninja do." Her eyes became downcast, filled with conflicting emotions. "Maybe being a ninja isn't so great after all. Sure, Leaf Ninja would never do any stuff like that. But with so many dangerous people out here, it's it better spending more time inside the village and getting stronger in a safe place?"

Naruto frowned in frustration. "No way Sakura! The best way to-AAAAAHHHHH!"

The blonde yelled in pain, hopping on one foot while his right toes were throbbing.

Kakashi put down his book and examined his injured Genin. "Naruto. Do try to keep watch of where you're going. Stubbing your foot on a rock in Shinobi sandals can be painful. And rather clumsy."

"Owe! Yeah! I get it! Owe! That really hurt." The boy complained, holding his open-toed right foot. Looking down, he glared at the rock that had gotten in his way. Only to see that it wasn't a rock. A clay bottle of medium-size rested on the ground. Several deep cracks accented its purple-grey body, with a rubber cork in the mouth.

"What is that?" Bending down, Kakashi lifted it into his hands, while curiosity drew Sasuke and Sakura closer.

"Hmmm. Now how did a lamp like this end up just sitting here in the road?" the Jonin asked aimlessly.

"Can I keep it?" an excitable Blonde asked. "Why would you want something that beaten-up and antiques? It's practically useless," Sakura asked. With a shrug, Kakashi handed the jar to Naruto. Who gave it an experimental shake. "Huh! Ge-Hey! There's something inside!"

"Huh! It won't open." Naruto was pulling hard on the cork. Harder. And even harder as his curiosity grew.

"Grrrrrrrrrrr."

"Uh, Naruto. That really isn't a good use for your mouth." Kakashi spoke as the boy sunk his teeth into the cork, then wrung it left and right to loosen the stopper. It took a few moments to get the blonde to start down the road back towards home, and he continued grumbling all the while.

"Hhhhhh. Naruto, why are-"

"Shhhhh." Sakura looked up, as her sensei quietly silenced her question. "Sakura," Kakashi whispered, "if Naruto wants to keep it, just let it be." "Besides. Working on that cork has kept him from asking more questions. Tell him to stop, then succeed, and he'll still be loud all the way back to the village."

Sakura gaped at her sensei in awe. Then dutifully smiled, while inside her head, 'Hhhhh, brilliant, putting stubborn stupidity to good use' Inner Sakura snickered between fingers over her lips.

Later that night, Team 7 made camp in a small clearing away from the road. Most of them were gathered around the fire, with Sakura edging closer to Sasuke, mustering her nerves for another round.

The last Uchiha internally groaned as a familiar question formed on Sakura's lips.

"AAAUUUUUHHHHHGGGGGGG! COME ON AND OPEN, ALREADY! Come on. Come on! I'll get you open, believe it."

"Gah! Naruto will you stop already! What's so important to make you want to open that piece of garbage anyway?" Sakura exclaimed. Now Sasuke did turn his eyes on Naruto. Frustrated by the blonde's clueless obsession, even if he was thankful that the guy had distracted Sakura from him.

"It's Not Junk, Sakura-chan! I found it, and I wanna keep it! Plus, I'm really, really close." The boy kept yanking on the bottle, as Sakura began to argue with him over logic or useless ideas about removing the cork. Together, they made so much noise even Kakashi grew a sliver of irritation.

'Hhhhhhh. Well, it may have distracted him from begging for more C-ranks for a bit. But I guess the kid's not gonna stop until he gets that bottle open,' Kakashi silently observed, as now Naruto had three clones out to 'help' him. 'And it's officially ridiculous.'

"Naruto." Three young faces turned to the Jonin: one pinning the bottle under their hands and feet, a second working their teeth around it, again, plus two hands on the ceramic neck, and the final one holding the second by their middle, and pulling back. "Whaahaa ish itch Krakrasshi wrenwrei?" The one with his jaws around the cork asked.

"Ummmmmm." Kakashi paused, with the other three staring at him, waiting. Until the Jonin rolled his eyes and stood up, pulling out one kunai. "Hand it over. I'll... open it for you, I suppose."

"Really, sensei?-Pffft-Pffft-Pffft-gkhh." One Naruto spat out from his mouth, while another walked over, holding the bottle to Kakashi. "That thing was getting dirt in my mouth."

The audience of three each made their own faces, or, two out of three, as Kakashi took the bottle, set it down sideways on a stump, and raised his kunai. "NOO!" Naruto threw his arms in, snatching the bottle back right as the kunai halted mere inches from his fingers.

"Huh? What's tingling?" In the faint light, Sasuke's ordinary eyes picked out a dull glow engulfing the kunai. Sakura did not notice it, though, and smacked Naruto over his head. "Idiot! You coulda lost your fingers! Do want it opened, or not?"

"Open, not broken. They ain't the same, ya know!" another Naruto complained, all three now rushing up to wrestle the bottle back from Kakashi. "It could be worth money." "I can use it to hold flowers." "Open, not broken." "This belonged to somebody, why break it if it's not broken?"

More explanations came, invading Kakashi's ears. "Okay." With a deep breath, Kakashi slid the kunai away, then held up his arm, pulling all three Naruto's dangling off their feet. "I won't break it, I'll even give you, my word. So long as once this is opened, you take my watch. That fight with Zabuza still left me a little drained."

Naruto's each looked at each other whispering, then gave a nod and let go; three turning back into one.

'Lazy. And Stupid' Sasuke silently thought. 'Kakashi still wants to be lazy. And Naruto's the same old foll by falling for it.'

Then, simple as a footstep, Kakashi opened the bottle.

Immediately, rapidly, plumes of smoke came erupting from the uncorked rim; a peculiar purple shade of smoke, billowing out stronger and stronger from the open jar.[1]

Rapidly, it smoke began compressing, forming a tight orb until-"Tadaaaaaaaawwww! Once again free at last!"

A portly figure smoothly burst forth. It was human, or at least appeared to be. The man wore a black vest and a pink long-sleeved changshan shirt. With a rounded face, a cheery smile framed by a thin goatee, a twirling moustache and sideburns, plus light, red-tinted sunglasses. The figure's arms gestured about, as he continued to loudly express his apparent gratitude.

"It's been a thousand years! The world I'm suurrree is waiting! Guess my identity! You have one try! Not one! All right, I'll tell you! I am the famous Genie of the Bottle!"

Sweeping his arm in the bow, the self-proclaimed genie prostrated himself before those assembled, to make a pledge. "I am prepared to grant you three wishes! You may wish for anything you want!"

"Ow! Hot-hot-hot-hot-hot-hot!" "Idiot. Naruto, I said that you'd burn your tongue. Why can't you listen to anything?" The Genin were gathered near the campfire, ignoring the strange being. While Kakashi lazed about but kept a sharp eye on him.

Irritated, a vein made a small bulge in the Genie's temple. "Don't you listen when somebody is talking to You!? I made a generous offer, one that comes around only in a thousand years."

"Stop lying," Naruto answered. "Genies aren't real, so stop pretending to be one. You're real loud and annoying, ya know."

At that,... all... movement... stopped.

'You're... not really one to talk. Naruto,' Kakashi silently observed.

'If someone's more annoying than the Loser, I might actually need to kill them,' Sasuke made a face.

'The annoying calling somebody annoying?' Sakura was glaring, while another voice in her head was shouting *"YOU'RE THE MOST ANNOYING PERSON THERE IS! STOP BEING A HYPOCRITE! CHAAA!"*

And naturally, Naruto wasn't registering any of this, instead kneeling closer to Sasuke and whispering behind a cupped hand. "This guy's seeming real shifty. Think if we just don't feed him, he'll go away?"

The apparent Genie moved forward. "I'm not suspicious. Take one look at me. I'm a Genie, for Real!"

"Why are you still saying that?" Naruto answered him. Sakura frowned at Naruto. "What are you doing? Stop talking to this guy and he will go away!"

"I am a Genie. For real. And Genie's don't lie," the 'guest' persisted.

"That's hardly a reassuring stance," Kakashi spoke up. "There, are a lot of stories. Some that warn people about trusting Genies to give honest wishes. Or of the Genie in question bending a person's wish to be more of a curse than a blessing. How can you prove to be an actual Genie and not a charlatan?"

"Well! Just ask for a wish, and I'll show you!"

"Oh yeah!" Naruto cried out. "Well if you're a Genie then make me the-"

"Naruto!" Kakashi spoke with authority, softly placing a hand on the boy's mouth. "Don't be in such a rush." "Hhmmmmmmmm." The Jonin deliberated for a moment, to find a wish that would be useful, but also the least impactful on other people. Or actually give Naruto enough power to be called a Hokage. And he had a small flicker of one, certain wish. "Excuse me? If you are a Genie, then could I have a complete set of the golden-edition Icha-icha novels. With the next book that will be released, plus all three autographed by their author?" with a smile in his eye.

"I Shall Grant Your Wish!" The strange being crossed his arms and spoke a pair of words. "Abra-Cadabrahhhh!" In a flourish, a pocket of smoke appeared, then cleared away just as fast, revealing four

neatly stacked volumes, wrapped in golden string, at Kakashi Hatake's foot.

The owner of the said foot... froze. There. Before him. Neatly Package. Hard-copies. 'It...' "can't... no....no way... Ahh!... hhh." He forgot to breathe, and collapsed, choking hard on his mask. Once he stopped seeing stars, though, his head was level with the wished gift, cruising over the spine, page counts, covers, and more. Kakashi even lifted his headband, his Sharingan pulsing with glee to ensure no illusions were present. Especially a green-covered one atop the pile, one that he had never seen before.

"That Can't Be! Is It REALLY?!" The man was squealing with excitement.

"Ta-Daaaaaw! A complete Icha-Icha series authored by Jiraya the Toad Sage! With the next instalment, Icha-Icha Tactics, which will not be out for public purchase until another three years!"

"Wait! Th-th-Three years! I Got The Next Book That Far In Advance!" Kakashi was on his knees, overwhelmed with such pleasure he was in awe.

"So you really are a Genie!" a hyperactive knucklehead declared, with stars dancing in his eyes.

"You're amazing!" Sakura cried, running up to the Genie and locking her arms around his neck. "That was the Coolest Thing I Ever Saw!"

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! If you're a Genie then I need This Wish!" Naruto came bounding up. "I Wish To Be Powerful Enough TO-MU-HohMF!"

Sasuke's hand clamped over Naruto's mouth. "Don't waste it. He said three wishes, total, not three apiece. I have a wish far more important than yours," he casually spoke. Sasuke's voice was quiet, even as his left hand trembled. His mind *was drifting back to the*

night his life shattered, and someone challenged him to grow strong enough to kill them if he ever could.

"Gayk! No Way!" "EWW!" Naruto had slobbered his tongue over Sasuke's hand to move it. Now both boys were glaring at one another, with sparks igniting between them. "You don't have anything that you need, Sasuke! Stop being a show off! There's nobody who needs this wish more than me!" Before this could escalate, the Genie actually split them apart.

"Now," the proven Genie gently yanked Sakura off of himself, dropping her between the boys while Kakashi was cradling his new book Icha-Icha Tactics, with reverence.

"Let's Get Down To Business! You only have two wishes left." Quickly, the Genin knelt close together and began debating over the next wish. The Genie hovered about them, careening to catch some hit or hear a request very soon.

Soon turned into later, later into longer. Eventually, the Genie grew tired as the pre-teens were talking together. So, he turned his attention back to Jonin. "Uh. Excuse me. Do you want another wish? Or would you please talk to the brats trying to make up their minds?"

"Huh?" Kakashi looked up from his silent celebration, "Did you say sometime?"

"Um. Would you please step back for a second, Mr Genie?" Sakura enquired to him. "We need a minute to decide, and Sensei does not count. Not after he already had a wish," Sakura established.

"Certainly. Young Masters. Take all the time you need. Now you have only one wish left."

"Huh!"/"WHAAATT!"/"HEY!" All the kids shouted in surprise. "Wait? How can that count?" Sakura complained. "You didn't say anything before, and nobody made a wish."

"Because, young mistress. That is one of the rules," the Genie replied to Sakura.

"What rules?"

"These right here. They're written clearly on the bottom of the bottle." Said bottle was raised into the air and extended to the trio to read. "Please read the third paragraph of the Genie instructions."

"What paragraph? The bottom's covered in mud."

"Hm. Oh my, that would be a problem," the Genie nodded, quickly whipping the dried mud caked onto the bottom of his residence.

Indeed, there was writing around the base. "Oh, I see," Sakura mumbled, reading the instructions about any declined offers from the Genie, after wish number one had been fulfilled.

"Well, it's certainly a pity that we didn't stop somewhere to wash it. Otherwise, Naruto might have seen those a lot sooner," Kakashi mused, now standing beside his students, with the new complete Icha-icha set held tightly in his left arm.

"Good! Now that We're on the same page! What is your final wish?"

"It's mine." Sasuke stepped forward.

"Hey, that's not fair! You can't keep something like this for yourself! Jerk!" Naruto shouted, pointing his finger into Sasuke's face.

"You'll only waste the last wish on Ramen." Sasuke bit back "Or something pointless like a dream. Kakashi-sensei already used the first one! And Sakura blew the second by throwing it away! Nobody that useless should get to use something this important!"

At Sasuke's accusation, Sakura melted into depression, as her crush called her "useless" and was correct about her wasting a wish. Kakashi didn't make any noticeable movement, but his mind was buzzing as both his eyes moved from one boy to another; then slid

his headband back down over his eye. However, Naruto's hands were clenched, trembling at his sides. 'If I made this wish right now. I could become the Hokage sure. But I could also wish for everyone in the village to finally start treating me like a person, not a germ that they want to disappear. Maybe, maybe I can even wish for the fox to be gone from me, for good. And Sasuke just insulted Sakura-chan!'

"Genie," Sasuke spoke to the eccentric spirit. "I wish for the power to-"

"NO! I need, I NEED, this wish a lot more badly than you! A lot, a lot more badly!" Whining like a juvenile, which he was, Naruto seized Sasuke by his collar, yanking the boy forward and down to the ground. "You Have No Idea What My Life Is Like Back In The Village! I'm The One Who Needs This Wish The Most!" Naruto spat into Uchiha's face, with tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

The boy's memory travelled back. *Back to the glares. The Neglect. The long, lonely nights curled on his bed, depressed and confused. The whispers:*

"Look. It... it's that kid. Why did they let that boy stay in the village" 'Those two grown-ups on the street.'

"Just return to your seat..." 'Iruka Sensei, on my first day in his class.

"Hey you little brat. Get out of here! I don't want you here. You're nothing but a pest!" The shopkeeper. I was just looking at a mask! I wasn't doing anything, and he hit me!"

"There. You see him? It's That Boy. He's the only one who failed. Hmph. Well, it serves him right. Just imagine it if he became a ninja. I mean he's the-" 'Those ladies by the Academy. After my third try to graduate.'

"I've gotta use this wish."

"No!" In a single second. Naruto was thrown over, and pinned to the ground.

"Sasuke..." Naruto recoiled, staring up at the Uchiha in fear. 'That look. It's... it's like that day at the Academy. They're like the same everyone gives me. But... but a lot stronger than those. His eyes... that Hatred... It's not for me. But... but it's still... there...'

Suddenly, Sasuke was lifted off of Naruto. "That's enough. The both of you," Kakashi spoke, then hoisted Naruto to his feet and set both boys down side-by-side.

"Hhhhh. Now listen," the Jonin-sensei scolded each one. "I know you both have some deep aspirations. But ask yourselves. Do you really want this?"

A pair of confused eyes turned to the grey-haired ninja. "Do you really want someone to just give you what you want so easily? Do you want to feel true accomplishment and satisfaction from the ambitions, and dreams you each carry? Because if you do. This isn't the way to do it."

Kakashi eyed Naruto, then Sasuke. 'I normally don't like to be this hands-on. But if they just get everything that they want so easily, what'll the consequences be for the village. Naruto isn't mature or understanding enough about the Hokage's position to just wish to become him so casually. He'd still be a thoughtless fool, but one with a big heart.'

'While if Sasuke just wishes for Itachi to die, he might become aimless and undedicated at best. Or carry that anger all the more heavily... like I did.'

"If you ask this Genie those questions," Kakashi spoke aloud, "then the truth is, he'll be the one who made you Hokage, Naruto. Or killed the man you want to avenge yourself on so badly, Sasuke. He will have done it, not the pair of you, and hold the true credit."

Naruto and Sasuke...

Neither of them moved. Both looked down, confused and contemplative.

Kakashi continued. "If you truly care about your dreams. Your ambitions, and aspirations. Then the best way to do that is by fulfilling them yourselves. Growing through missions, training, and facing real struggles that stand before you. Until you accomplish your desires in your unique way."

"That is what a true ninja does. It's how the 4th Hokage gained his title, and the best of the Uchiha rose to greatness. By creating success for themselves instead of just looking for easy wins or letting someone else do the work for them."

That hit the spot. Naruto and Sasuke both started to question asking the Genie to fulfil their goals for them.

"The best way to reach the goals you set for yourselves," Kakashi kept speaking, his eye crackling like a smile. "Is to train hard and face serious challenges along the way. And you might accomplish more than you originally intended to. Like the mission we just completed, the help we gave to those people, and the growth each of you made during that adventure."

Kakashi Hatake had made a fatal mistake.

"But that won't happen sensei!" Naruto shouted. "You were just saying how we won't be having any C-rank missions for a long while. We can't grow if there's no danger for us to beat up, and D-rank missions don't have adventure! Wait. Wait? Adventure! That's it!"

Naruto shrugged out of his jacket and rushed over to the Genie. "Hey! Hey! Genie! I wish for a big dangerous adventure! For all of us to go somewhere with strong enemies, with people in trouble so we can help them, and the biggest adventures somebody can know. Take us somewhere that will let all of us get strong!"

"Adventure and danger are what you want! Well, then I KNOW THE BEST PLACE TO GO!"

"Wait-" Kakashi shouted.

The Genie began to spin. Smoke wasn't billowing now, but erupting from his arms, encircling the clearing they all stood in, then forming an extra ring, another, and another, engulfing the campsite. "Oh no! No revokements or escape clause!" Kakashi, from outside the smoke trap, glanced back. He's substituted himself and his Genie away, then immediately, tendrils shot forth, encompassing every ninja and pulling them back into the smoke pocket. 'Fast!'

"Your wish is my CommanDDDDDD!"

Quickly, everyone and everything attached to them got consumed in a vortex the Genie conjured. All of the Leaf ninjas were levitating, tumbling about and spinning, with barely any sense of up, sideways or down. "Naruto! What you do!" Sasuke's voice sounded in the chaos. "Huh! Stop! We didn't agree on this!" Sakura exclaimed in fear. Kakashi was silent, his arms flailing about to grasp a trace of his precious students. "Whaaaa-Hooooo!" And Naruto was far too excited.

All four felt as though a vacuum was drawing them in. Loud, confusing screams were made in the smoke around them. Until a single clear voice broke through:

"Abaraaaaaaaaah-Cadabaraaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

End.

And that is the end of the Beginning.

Especially about the actions and words of the characters. I also want to capture the true character, habits and thoughts of the original material in my fanfic stories. And present them authentically, believably and humorously.

Whisking them away to the World of One Piece. With only a single way back home.

How will this affect each of them? Naruto with no way to become Hokage? Sasuke removed from the goal of his revenge and without a curse seal? Sakura ripped away from the comforts and complacency of her home? Kakashi isolated from the village, and fully responsible for the Genin?

P.S. I didn't want to separate Kakashi from his beloved Icha-icha books, otherwise he'd become catatonic for who knows how long? Or worse, give up on those books entirely. Besides, imagine sharing those volumes with people of One Piece. Especially a certain Cook with a swirly eyebrow.

[1]-Naruto OVA, the Genie, and the Three Wishes. Whether canon or not, it is an in-universe explanation for crossing into a different dimension. I prefer to find methods to cross between dimensions that are within the universe or lore of a franchise. It makes the cross-over less bewildering and celebrates human choices and characters more than, random portals or Godly intervention.

Plus, it opened up the potential for the team to return to their home dimension, and giving them a goal to work towards rather than dropping them in the cold and wandering around aimlessly.

[2]-Naruto Shippuden, Episode 180, "Inari's Courage Put to the Test."

Please, type a Review about anything you enjoyed or disliked.

Where are We?

Chapter 2:

Where are we?

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"" *Inner thoughts* " "=images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please, Read and Review

Pop-

In a single instant....

A series of choices made by pure chance. Altered the course of two different dimensions. As Team 7 disappeared. Leaving no trace behind of them.

Four minutes passed. Everything was unchanged. Birds flew from above. A family of rabbits peeked out from their hole. The wind began to rise, forming a gentle breeze through the stoic trees.

Another minute....in the same spot.

"Here! We! ARE!" a deep, thundering roar echoed in the clearing. Smoke, the shade of sulphur, came emerging from the spaces between the wind. Billowing forth, innumerable tendrils of such smoke came forwards, extending around themselves and forming a dense spiral. Upon contact with the ground, shapes came emerging

through the vortex, churning until the silhouettes of humans could be made out. They were the size of adults. One carried a pair of swords. Another shouldered an odd, serpentine bow, holding hands with the swordsman. Plus another pair, a well-endowed female aside a single powerful man. Large scrolls were carried by all of them, near the small of their backs.

After a handful of seconds, their bodies were clear through the yellow haze. Which continued receding until only wisps remained. "DELIVERY! No refund, no returns." With a final declaration, the smoke was gone, and those who arrived stood there.

Looking around, one individual gazed about. Old memories stirring in their mind. An odd sense of loss, nostalgia, wistfulness, and more. A well of regret and concern welled within them, mixing with relief.

"So. We're finally home. I guess that wish on the Bottle really was a good idea.."

"All of those people. Those adventures."

A female voice answered her lover. "None of such memories will depart from our thoughts, my love. Just like we never left each other, when things were at their most bleak and treacherous."

Another woman spoke up. "I agree. I'm actually eager to see how different the Leaf Village is, through our eyes now."

"Then let's not waste time." The oldest figure present stated.

"It is time to return to the Lead Village. Time for us to return home, and show Lord Hokage the growth we have made, across all these years, and through the chaos of the Grand Line."

(To the past: Genin aged 12, Kakashi aged 26)

Team 7 were tumbling through a shapeless vacuum. Nothing within their touch could be grasped, yet colours, sights and sounds surrounding them continued spirally, chaos personified. Still, their bodies continued, drawn onward. None of the four had any sense of space, distance or otherwise; only a thrilling velocity forcing them towards a single destination was clear to their senses.

It all lasted a few moments.

"We're Heeerrrrrrree!" The Genie's voice came piercing through their ears. confused. "Where is here!?" "What is going on!?" "WOOOO!" Various shouts responded, some desperate and others

Soon, Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura, and Uzumaki Naruto felt solid ground beneath their feet. The eldest ninja steadied himself, while the others dropped to their knees, and two flat on their butts. Gradually, the blanket of purple smoke unfurled from their bodies. New sensations reached them: warm sunlight, moisture laced with salt hung in the air, and soft grass between their open-toed shoes. Once their faces were uncovered, bright sunlight filled their vision, blinding them in its radiance.

A salty scent touched their noses. Crashing waves echoed behind them. Overlaid with scents of fire, explosions, and the distant sounds of violence.

Sakura and Sasuke were dazed, too bewildered to grasp their placement. While Naruto and Kakashi recovered quicker, opening their eyes to a beautiful clearing. Dense forests were in the distance, while a blend of flowers and grass surrounded them. The sky was cloudless, and the warmest sun they had ever felt comforted the visitors.

"Here We Are!" Everyone whirled around, to find the Genie behind them. "I have granted your wish! This world will certainly allow you to find the adventures, dangers, and people to fulfil the wish you have made. I even have a brother here, who can grant wishes as well. Finding him might be tough. But you'll definitely be able to have

more wishes from him, and get back to where we were through one of them!"

Each of the ninjas were baffled. "Here? Where exactly is here?! Where have you brought us?!" Kakashi demanded; his voice deep, serious, commanding.

"Bye-bye!" The Genie answered.

"Hey wait! What has Naruto's wish done? Where is the Leaf Village!" Sakura screamed.

"Be-hu! Ge-hu! Be-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-HU-HU-HU!" the Genie simply laughed, his arms flailing about while the bottle began to suck him inside. "Still Tickles." As the last wisps entered their confines, the bottle's colour was shifting. Strange lights came resonating along the edge of its profile, and then the vessel was glowing and continued levitation up to hover in the air. Moving higher and higher, a growing star, it was ascending to the heavens. "I hope you all have fun here! Let's meet again! In your own home! In another Thousand yeeeeaaaaarrrrrrrrssssssss!" With a final twinkle, the bottle was gone. Leaving the ninjas behind.

For a long while, four pairs of eyes were trained on the sky, watching for a glimpse of their strange acquittance. Eventually, Kakashi turned his attention to their surroundings. While Naruto moved to help Sakura to her feet. After accepting his help, the pinkette promptly shoved Naruto to the ground. "Sasuke? You okay?" Rushing straight for the Uchiha, Sakura swept her hands over him, questioning if he had been hurt or dazed. Completely uncaring for the blonde boy.

Naruto brushed it off and began to glance around, innocent and confused. 'Huh. A spot with adventure. This spot sure looks quiet. Did that Genie do it right or-?'

"He-He-Help! Help me, please!"

"Get back here, you piece of shit!"

Turning their heads at the sound, Team 7 witnessed a younger man, dressed in scorched tatters, stained with blood, stumbling towards them. Behind the man was a pair of armed thugs, wearing splotted bandanas, open vests, dirty pants, and weapons.

'What kind of sword are those?' Kakashi thought. 'The hilts and blades are connected by a strange metal cup, covering their hands. is that-?' Popping his special eye to be certain, Kakashi traced a thin line of metal between the cup and pommel visible as a raider drew their weapon overhead.[1]

"PI-PI-Please! PI-PI-Please, save me from these pirates!"

"Hang on, I'm coming to save you!"

"Naruto, wait!" but the blonde was already rushing off, ignoring his sensei's words. Kakashi sighed, 'Will he ever follow commands?'

"Naruto, you fool, stop! Sensei said to-"

"Enough Sakura." The girl froze. Kakashi's voice carried a hard edge, the same he had during their confrontations with Zabuza. "In fact, if we save that man, he might tell us where we are right now. Go."

Faster than a blink, Kakashi was moving forward to catch up with his orange-coloured student.

Naruto kept running ahead, causing the brutes in his vision to pause in surprise. With a smirk, Naruto leapt into the air with one leg ready for a kick at one target. But, the second pirate ran into him, with a sharp slash coming to meet him.

"Gaaaa!-"

The weapon cleaved into his chest, and the grunt holding it smirked.

"Just another useless kid, playing hero and got himself killed."

Then in a flash, the body fixed by a sword was replaced with a log.

"Huh-AAh!?" Voicing his surprise, the pirate's body pitched forward, weighed down by the heavy log his sword was planted in. "Hey!" Glancing up, the man saw another child, with black hair, dressed in a navy shirt and white shorts, twirling in the air straight for him. The movement built-up momentum, driving the boy's foot straight into the grunt's head.

'Hmmm. Perfect target. Thanks for looking up when I called.' Sasuke smirked with satisfaction. The kick launched the man onto his back. And he landed, the Uchiha look back in surprise.

"Gawwwhh! Little shit!" The grunt brushed dirt off his face, drawing a knife from his belt and scrambling towards Sasuke.

"Hey!" came Naruto's voice. "Super-Shuriken toss!" The Genin threw out two hand fulls of Shuriken; completely off-target. "Ahhh! Naruto!" Sakura cried, narrowly evading several of the sharp flying stars. Both of the pirates stopped as well, blinking at the display, and Sasuke took the chance, sweeping one's feet out from under them and tied down with a series of ninja-wire.

"Hey! No Fair!" Naruto dashed up to Sasuke, shouting all the while. "Sasuke, you selfish bastard! That guy was mine! Why did you steal my action!? It sucks, trying to make yourself look all cool!"

"Hh. The only thing that sucks here is you," the Uchiha scoffed. "Not one of those shuriken touched him, and you passed up the opportunity. I don't need to try anything. You're just terrible."

That riled up Naruto, who pulled two hands to his sides. "Grrrrrrr! I'll show you-"

"Enough!" The boys froze in place. While Sakura did the same. She had been running up with one fist cocked back to drive into Naruto's skull, but the charge to take payback on Naruto's terrible shuriken

throw stopped in its tracks. Kakashi stood behind them, with the other pirate already bound and weaponless.

"Naruto," Kakashi scolded, "You are far too slow to react, and that dramatic shuriken throw nearly injured your own teammates. Sasuke took the openings that came, and the first ended. Well done," he nodded at the Uchiha. "But your rivalry isn't important right here." With a few steps, Kakashi grabbed the other brigand and moved to a nearby tree.

"Now. I have some questions for the pair of-"

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" More shouts of gratitude filled the air. The young man in grimy clothes knelt towards the Shinobi, bowing his head all the while. Until a loud shriek filled the air. "Oh no! The-the-the Village! Pl-pl-please, help my village! The-the-there's a crew of pirates running wild there! The-the-they're looting, burning, kidnapping everyone in sight! The-the-there're just too many, and the Marines aren't here to help us! Pl-pl-please, please!" He was on his knees, with both hands folded together, begging.

"You need help! I'll help you save them!" Naruto nearly ran off again. Nearly.

Sasuke tripped his teammate as the boy ran by, and soon bound him with ninja wire. "Slow down for a second, Loser. Stop running off the play hero all the time."

"Gaaah, come on!" Naruto spat a tuft of grass out of his mouth, complaining. "We need to help these people! They're getting attacked by pirates right now!"

Kakashi groaned in resignation. "Naruto! We need to know who this man is. And whether we can, or should, do anything." Turning towards the pirates, the air around the group began to drop; growing colder and bleak. The pirates shivered, their bravado overwhelmed with a single emotion: fear.

The Jonin glowered down at the pair, driving a pulse around him, one so dense it rendered the marauders shitless.

"Now. I have some questions. Which the pair of you will answer."

Under Kakashi's watchful eye, the pirates confessed to all his questions. Their crew numbered 60 men, nobody with a significant bounty, and were directed by a "captain Sendou." A rookie pirate looking to become a big shot. Kakashi was confused by certain words that the pirates used, such as weapons called 'canons' or 'rifles,' but mentally catalogued the topics, and ordered the Genin to do the same.

Once the interrogation was done, the Jonin turned towards the villager, and weighed his options. 'Getting involved with these pirates could be dangerous. Yet, I still have no idea where we are. This isn't a mission, nor is there anyone in this village who are particular towards the four of us.'

'Yet leaving these people to fend for themselves doesn't feel right. Charging in could come back to haunt us if this Sendou has any connections. But for the present, helping this village could mean shelter, food and some information from anyone still there. Enough to learn about where we are. That settles it.'

"Excuse me," Kakashi addressed the kneeling villager. "My name is Kakashi Hatake. Can you share yours?"

"Min-Min-Minorou! My-my-my name is Minorou. Pl-pl-please hel-"

"It's alright, Minorou." The man replied, raising a hand for silence. "We will help your village." The man's face broke out in relief. While Naruto yelled in excitement, "Come on, come on, untie me already."

Kakashi continued to speak, "Please, tell us where the village is, and draw a small map of the layout here in the ground. Along with the position of the Pirate's ship. I have a plan to stop them and get your people to safety. But the requires some information from you."

Gradually, Minoura told the Jonin all that he needed to know. Next, Kakashi called his Genin over and began to share his plan with them. Sasuke and Naruto protested at the suggestion that they will be paired up. "Didn't you both, together, save me from Zabuza with teamwork? As I recall, you both duped him, brilliantly, and eliminated one water clone by chance. And then drove the last remnants of Gato's thugs into a trap, saving Inari in the process, and crushed the brigands."[2]

Reminded of their past success, Naruto and Sasuke fixed each other with a look, then nodded their agreement.

Sakura agreed to accompany Kakashi. Then, leaving the neutralized pirates knocked out, the Lead Shinobi moved out towards the village.

Within Hanma-Village, the Swirl-Fan[3] Pirates were tearing homes apart, grabbing women from their children, and pushing back the few men still standing to fight. Captain Sendou watched in grim pleasure as his crew were at work. 'Heh! There won't be much, but you gotta start small before going after the tougher targets. This village will have some valuables, and plenty of worthless lives to sell off to the Auctioning Houses. I'll get some extra money, and more men from this success, then move on to some better targets.'

Soon a pair of crewmen approached their captain, carrying a large chest. While a third of the crew were dragging people in shackles onboard to sell off.

One Pirate was chasing after a mother and her child, moving out of the village for the tree line. Yet the brigand was gaining on them with each step. Reach out to seize the young woman.

"Yeeeeeeeeaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!" With a loud shout, an orange swarm engulfed the man and left him beaten and dazed. Simultaneously, another boy ushered the women to the trees and was joined by his partner.

"It's alright. Just stay hidden, and we'll help your village."

"Naruto. Create a couple of clones to keep her safe from any pirates who come this way."

"Right."

Leaving the pair of civilians with a few guards, the boys went back to the pirate and dragged him up to the rooftops.

Meanwhile, a grown man with grey hair and a pre-teen pinkette snuck around the hull of a brigantine ship.[4] Crawling on the vertical surface with their chakra control, the pair were on the side opposite to the wharf, to lessen the chances of being spotted. The pair moved around slowly, with the older one counting the different footfalls on the decks or peering into the hull.

They saw the group of captives and captors moving about on the decks and waiting. 'Now, we just need Sasuke and Naruto to get their attention.'

A handful of minutes later, a familiar shout came to Kakashi's ears. Followed by a scuffle from the village square.

"Fire-style: Great Fire-ball Jutsu!"

"What! C-c-c-captain! Th-that kid just-"

"I know, you need to tell me. Must be Devil-fruit powers. Come on men! Charge the brat all at once and pin him down! Someone with his powers will be worth a lot as a slave!"

With a roar of excitement, feet clattered about the deck. Before silence grew onboard.

'Hmmm,' Kakashi nodded with approval. 'They certainly do get people's attention. Now Sakura and I can free the slaves, then force the rest of the Pirates to run back here, straight towards me. Oh-' SOMebody was beginning to abandon their plan.

"Sakura-stay here." The man whispered to his Genin.

"But sensei! They're talking about giving Sasuke into slavery! I have to help and protect him." The girl complained, even beginning to stand up, but Kakashi forced her back down with one hand.

"That won't happen," Kakashi assured her. "Sasuke and Naruto know their jobs and are fulfilling them. Now, we have to do our jobs and free these people. Remember, you stay with the people and I'll take the Pirates when they come back. Alright?"

"But Sasuke-"

"Has Naruto with him. They can watch each other's backs in a fight, just like they did against Zabuza and Haku. You know that. Know, focus on this job, not on him. Understood."

It wasn't a question, but a command. With a sigh of resignation, Sakura nodded. Then the pair slipped aboard and got to work.

Back in the village, Naruto and Sasuke stood before the crowd of charging Pirates. Several others were scattered about, sporting different bruises and burns. While most of the people were behind the Genin and scared to see a pair of 12-year-olds standing up to the Pirates.

The Uzumaki and Uchiha grinned. Caught-up in the thrill of the one place the pair would cooperate together: battle.

"Naruto! These are a lot more than those thugs in Land of Waves. Split them up and attack from different angles! And watch out!"

"Got it! Let's go!" Naruto brought his hands together, crossing his hands to perform a signature technique. "Multi-Shadow-Clone Jutsu!"

Columns of smoke erupted, giving the Pirates pause. Once it cleared, many stepped back in awe. The villagers were equally

surprised. 200 copies of a single boy filled the village. Most of them formed a buffer between the Pirate crew and the villagers, with the rest scattered across multiple streets and rooftops. The clones were even taunting the Pirates:

"You think you can outnumber me, Do ya!" "You're outdone four to one!" "Just sit down and surrender!" "There ain't no ways you can win!"

Captain Sendou growled in frustration. "These two might be a problem."

"Let's go!" each of the Naruto's charge at the crew, with Kunai drawn and eager to win.

The Pirates recovered and began to fight back. Many of the Narutos were hit, but some landed several hits of their own. Yet the grown men could shrug them off, with some effort. The captain had drawn an extra sword, cutting down several with each move.

Still, the action kept them distracted. A situation compounded by the smoke given off by every felled clone. Hiding the other Ninja.

"Demon-Wind Shuriken!" A large, spinning blade cut through the smoke screen, felling several pirates at once. Sasuke peered down, Sharingan ready and focused. The Uchiha traced both the shuriken and the pirates, throwing smaller stars and kunai at the right opportunities; disarming or crippling more and more of the Pirates. Eventually, the Fuma-Shuriken split, cutting down more opposition then travelled in arcs before Sasuke caught both, effortlessly.

Naruto was also at work. Dropping smoke bombs and additional clones to keep the Pirates occupied, while some extras led any civilians nearby to a safer distance.

Between the pair, 50 pirates were cut down to 35 within minutes. Captain Sendou growled, shouting for the brats to face him in a clear field, like true men. The Genin only laughed, hidden by the smoke and aggravating the captain more.

"Fine then!" Dropping his swords, the temperamental man reached for his pistols. Drawing several and firing off randomly. Uncaring about who was hit by his shots, whether it was the people or his crew. 'I'll always replace them with mountain bandits or lowlifes from other towns and cities anywhere. They're expendable, and these' brats are making a mockery out of me!

Sasuke's eyes grew wide! His Sharigan picked up the minuscule projectiles flying from the smoke. Until one moved towards him. Shifting slightly, thanks to his precognitive sight, the tiny pellet swept by an inch from his cheek. Dropping to the ground, he saw similar projectiles tearing through the walls of houses nearby. Watching this, the boy's mind was blank towards unfamiliar weapons.

Naruto wasn't any better. At the sound of the pistols, curiosity got the better of him. Peeping around a house, one bullet passed through a narrow beam, sending showers of splinters over his face.

"Aaahhhhhhggggggg! Ahhhhhhggggggg!" Naruto shouted in agony. His hand flew up, rubbing over his face. The boy wanted to get rid of the sharp feeling cutting inward, but his hands only forced the splinters deeper into his skin.

"Naruto!" Sasuke shouted at the screams. Slipping through the houses, he soon found his teammate, lying on the ground and calling out. "S-Sasuke. Get them off! Get them off! Get them off me!"

Sasuke moved to see what injured Naruto, but his eyes caught another danger. Dashing around the orange ninja, Sasuke drew a kunai, as most of the Pirates came into view. Following the screams to where Naruto had landed.

"Heh! You're finished, boys." Captain Sandou swore through gritting teeth. He was focused and angry, eager to make the boys suffer for humiliating his crew.

"Excuse me!" A new voice called out, from the ship. Everyone turned. To spot a tall figure on the deck, amidst a pile of men, beaten

unconscious.

"My ship! My men! Where are my-You Bastard!"

Now Captain Sendou was angry. And his crew knew this was the worst. Once he became angry, Sendou's habits would become cantankerous and aggressive. The man tore a sword from his closest men, having spent all of his ammunition, and charged towards the ship. While his men remained frozen by fear, spotting the red-coloured eye of the new arrival.

Kakashi frowned, taking in the situation. "Sasuke. Get Naruto back!" Suddenly- crackling screams came, so loudly some pirates were even pressing on one or both ears, then chirping of a high pitch was screeching between the loud sizzling tone.

"Who, I, there ain't any birds here," Captain Sendou complained.

"CHIDORI!"

Dusk was falling over Hanma Village. After Kakashi annihilated the pirates, some were still living and had to be restrained by the Jonin. Once it was done, Minorou had come forwards and rallied the civilians together in thanks. Soon after, most of the raiding pirates were bound together aboard smaller boats and sent out to sea, adrift. With so few grown men in the village, Kakashi pragmatically decided it was the best choice, rather than try to guard 60 grown men throughout the night. The Captain, Sendou, remained in the village, bound with his own chains and knocked out by Kakashi to prevent any trouble from the Pirate captain.

The people were preparing a feast, celebrating their salvation and thanking the saviours who made it possible. While this was happening, Team 7 had gathered in the headman's house for privacy. Naruto's face had some bandages where the splinters had been removed. Sakura and Sasuke knelt on a broad carpet, her

intermittently inching closer to him. While Kakashi himself was kneeling near the headman, examining a pistol in his hands.

"So. A small amount of explosive powder is placed in the tube. Followed by a tiny metal ball, and all of it is pressed together. Then the arm is set back, and the weapon can be pointed at a target. By twitching the small device with one's fore-finger, the arm ignites the flit, setting the power on fire, and propelling the metal ball outwards."

"That is right, Sav-ahchem-Mr. Kakashi." Clearing his throat, the headman, Tarm, nodded from his bed. The man had been one of the first to try and fight the pirates but was shot in his leg and made the first prisoner. Once the prisoners were freed, he was taken to the local doctor along with the others to be healed.

Despite the injuries, Tarm insisted on giving the Ninjas all the help that he could. Though he continuously called each of them "Saviours." Something that didn't feel too comfortable for Kakashi, who insisted on using his given name.

The Genin were looking over the pistol in wonder, too, while Kakashi drew a small scroll from his vest pocket. Opening the scroll, he placed the pistol in the centre. With a single hand sign, it disappeared into smoke, sealed inside. 'This would be invaluable for the village to use, and give any shinobi quite the surprise. I'll show it to Lord Hokage once-'

"So You have one too? A Devil-Fruit power!" Tarm exclaimed. "Um. Sorry, Tarm," Kakashi scratched the back of his head. "A what power?"

The Headman frowned, confused. "Devil-Fruit Power. Strange abilities that someone can gain by eating a Devil Fruit. That's the only explanation for you or the boys to have powers like breathing fire or making copies of himself. It's quite rare to find any here in the East Blue, or anywhere outside of the Grand Line. How did the four of you end up here?"

Kakashi didn't answer. A small....sinking... worry-some feeling began to grow in his stomach.

"Grand Line! What is that?" Naruto spoke, with curiosity on his face. "I guess you've just never seen ninjas before. Oh, and we came from the Hidden Leaf Village, not some Big Blue Place! Why did you ask that?"

"The Hidden Leaf Village?" Tarm raised an eyebrow. "Are you feeling alright, son? There's no such place named that on Jeeha Island. And how come you don't know about the East Blue when you live in it?"

"East Blue?" Sakura joined the conversation. Her eyes narrowed, apprehensively. "And what do you mean by Jeeha Island. Isn't this place still part of the Land of Fire? Like Naruto said, we're ninjas from the Hidden Leaf Village," Sakura tapped the leaf symbol on her headband. "Don't you know of it, where the Yondaime Hokage came from?"

Tarm's eyes widened. Rapidly, they passed between both the blonde and pinkette; as if each needed their head examined or had grown extra limbs.

"Tarm," Kakashi's voice cut through them. His posture was rigid, anxious, with one hand clutching his pants and the other resting on his chin. "Please. Can you show us a map of the world? Or a map of various islands, here in the 'East Blue.?"

"Um....of course Sav-er... Mr. Kakashi. Give me a moment." Slowly, the man limped over to his cabinets, while Kakashi took a hand on Naruto's shoulder, guiding him back to the other Genin where all four knelt together. "Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke. I need you each to remain calm. If you feel like you need to leave this hut. You may. But go outside of the village to the trees and let out your emotions. No matter what we learn."

Sakura began trembling. Even Sasuke grew anxious at his sensei's tone. "K-Kakashi-s-sensei. Why-why? What is going on?" At

Sakura's question, Naruto just blinked, confused.

His eye narrowed, sharply. "I think. That we aren't in the Land of Fire anymore. Or even on the same continent at all. That Genie may have brought us to the other side of the world. Or somewhere else away from the Elemental Nations."

"Here you are." Stepping forward, Tarm stood before them with a leather satchel in hand. He motioned towards a table off to one side, then waited. Slowly, the ninjas stood up and walked over, where Tarm lit three candles, then drew a folded cloth from the bag, unfolded the contents to reveal a map, and set the candles at each corner as anchor points. The map depicted a large Sea with various scattered islands dotting the vast Blue expanses.

"This is where we are, Jeeha Island," the headman had one finger resting on a single point on the map. "There are several other islands across the East Blue, that vary in size. Like Dawn Island in Goa Kingdom, Mirrorball Island, Clockwork Island, and Sixis Island. Along with archipelagos like the Organ Islands, the Gecko Islands, and Conomi Islands. Do any of these places look like your home island?" Tarm encouraged them. "Or, I can open more chats of the North Blue, the South Blue and West Blue to comb through them."

The ninja began looking over the maps. Yet, it was a fruitless effort. None of them found anything which resembled the Elemental Nations. Kakashi, the most experienced and mature of the group, felt the gravity of their situation the hardest.

'None of these islands or continents resemble the Elemental Nations at all. Plus, the weapons like the pistol, or cannon on board the ship are not weapons known even in the Land of Ice. Could.....Could that Genie... he mentioned a 'perfect place and-'

""I have granted your wish! This world will certainly allow you to find-""

"No!" The Jonin quietly exclaimed.

"Uhhhh. Sensei," Naruto spoke up in a timid voice. "What... what's up? You're acting kinda scary, ya know."

Glancing around, Kakashi noticed the worried faces on each of his Genin. Taking a moment, calling on experience, the ninja pushed his own emotions to the side. And marshalled his thoughts.

"Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke. I... do each of you recall what that Genie spoke of?"

"Tarm?" Kakashi looked over to the headman. "Before we arrived here, one of my students uncovered a bottle, which held a person inside, claiming they were a Genie. After some... proof was displayed," Kaakshi was patting a pouch where his most precious treasures were stashed, "Naruto claimed a wish to be somewhere with danger and adventure at any turn."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," a knucklehead impulsively claimed the spotlight of attention before him. "Well, Sakura by accident said no to a wish, and then we lost, so I wished to go somewhere to get active, get dangerous, and get strong."

"A world. with adventures, dangers, and people to fulfil the wish you have made," Kakashi continued. "A world. Not an island. Not heaven or hell. Not a summoning dimension. A world." A paused following that. A poignant pause in the room, where no sound save a dull haze of the candles was made. The audience each grasped this at separate paces; their host first, jerking his head and looking between his guests; Sasuke stood white and pale, and went back to examining the maps. Sakura's mouth hung open, and so did Naruto's, although he still remained on his feet while hers gave out from under her.

"Sasuke," Kakashi spoke. "None of the islands on these maps resemble the Elemental Nations at all. The Islands themselves are too small, according to the scale legend. And I've never heard of any places like Goa Kingdom or Ilusia Kingdom."

"Really, Sensei!" Naruto cut into the man's observations. "Well does that mean that the Genie granted my wish! Those pirates we had to fight were weird, but we beat'em, right? Hey, how about we go find more," Grasping his bicep, Naruto was grinning with excitement. "I'll get to show off my strength, all of you can stand back and watch."

"Sensei?" Sakura murmured, looking up from the floor. "If, if, we don't... the Genie, he's gone... And, as he left he said, one-th-th-th-thousand years. You mean we're in a different world. W-w-w-with-home-home-home-" She was hyperventilating. Tarm gathered the girl in his arms, and with a nod from Kakashi he sat her down on the table, gentling rubbing circles on her back until Sakura could breathe, and passed a glass of water to her.

"It's nowhere!" Sasuke exclaimed, throwing a map aside, and spreading both hands across the table to keep standing. "The Land of Fire. The Village. Or anything. Gone. The village. our home, the Hokage, it's gone."

"WHAAAAAT!" Now Naruto was anxious, and his cry shook the house. Diving forwards, Naruto nearly knocked the table over and was tearing through the maps, too. One, after another, then a second one viewed upside down, he held two maps overtop the other, or with even less sense he tried fitting Islands together like puzzle pieces.

"There are... options to rule out," Kakashi tried assuring them while rubbing one hand over his neck. "But, if I am correct, this means there isn't any Leaf Village here at all. Or any other ninjas who can help us. We're stranded, totally cut off, and there is no Leaf Village here for us to return to."

Naruto wasn't paying any attention. Just, staring into empty space, still in the centre of the table. 'A... a different world. I didn't want this. I don't, this is. I just wanted more adventures and danger! Now, now there's no Leaf Village here. But that would mean I can't become Hokage at all! It means no Ichiraku Ramen, the only place that I feel happy. It means I....Iruk... Iruka-sensei. And Old man Hokage....'

Naruto's mind grew bleak. The one, constant source of comfort across his lonesome, terrible life was gone. 'I can't see the Hokage anymore.'

"NARUTO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!" Sakura hollered. She charged at the dazed, lonesome child. But one arm stopped her. "Sakura." Kakashi kept his arm extended, holding back the girl. "Casting fault or blame here will accomplish nothing. Do not-"

"Sensei! His Stupid Wish Has Us Stuck Here! The Genie. Already. Disappeared! Now. We. Can't. See. Our. Families. At. All! Anything. We. Wanted. To. Do. In. Our. Lives. Is. In. a Completely. Different. Place! And. We. Have. No. Way. To. Go. Back! IT's ALL NARUTO's FAULT!"

Tears were streaking down her cheeks, accented the pinkette's distress. She was deeply terrified, to the point of ignorance. Her minds were dominated by selfishness, and the desire to vent that confusion on someone.

"JUST LET ME HIT HIM SENSEI! NARU-!"

"Sakura." Kakashi's voice spoke up, still fixing her in place. "Some could also say that you wasting one wish also resulted in this. Since it could have been used to give us a way back. Or, you should blame me for giving Naruto an idea to wish for a place with adventure. I will not... allow... you to hurt him like that. For now, we need to stay together, and decide where to go or what we do next."

Keeping a firm hold on the girl, the Jonin glanced at Sasuke and Naruto. Both were deeply shaken.

"Old... man....Old-man....." Naruto whispered.

"HMmmm," the Jonin-sensei narrowed his eye. 'That's right. Naruto looked up to Hokage, and Lord Third is very close with him. And the position that he aspires so hard to reach. Now it's gone.'

'And Sasuke.' Sure enough, the last Uchiha looked deeply troubled. Even lost.

"Hhhhhhh." Kakashi's resignation echoed throughout the room. He began to address the Genin again when-

"Pardon me?" Tarm spoke up. While Kakashi and Sakura met his eyes, the two boys barely moved. "That might not be the case. Instead of... another world. It might be that your home island is on the Grand Line." Reaching for another map, the man spread it open before the ninjas.

"This is far from accurate. But it does show another sea that lines in between all of the Blues. The Grand Line. That Ocean is known to have many different islands that are unique and wonderous. Some of them are also cut off from the rest of the world, like the Country of Wano."

"It might be possible that your home is somewhere on that ocean. But if that is true...."

The man grew silent. Ignorant of the faint hope he left dangling before the ninja.

"Please." A single word, filled with desperation, slipped from the Jonin. "Continue, Mr. Tarm. Please."

"Oh. Um! Well. I used to serve in the Navy, a while back. There, I met some junior officers named Rapanui, Isoka and Pukau.[5] They spoke of stories about that place that are beyond belief, so I began to learn about it to try and prove them wrong. I even went to that sea with a crew. And barely came out alive."

"I'll start at the beginning for the kids. You can see on the maps that this world is separated by a single large continent: The Red Line. The Grand Line traverses it perpendicularly, separating the Oceans into the North Blue, South Blue, East Blue, and West Blue."

"The Grand Line though is the home of the Devil Himself. That Sea can only promise one thing alone. And that is Death. The Place is worse than other people think or speak of. The weather conditions are entirely unpredictable, or defy any sense or reason. Terrible sea monsters dwell there, large enough to swallow a ship or a village whole. A single wrong choice can end the life of an entire crew."

"And if the elements don't kill you. The people who sail it will. The Place is actually called the Pirate Graveyard. From the sheer scale of crews that have been killed in that sea. Likely millions, across hundreds of years. Travelling there can be near-suicidal."

The Ninjas grew quiet again, as Tarm finished his story.

"Why do so many people go there, if it's such a deadly place?" Kakashi inquired.

Tarm took a deep breath. "Because of the One Piece. The Greatest Treasure in the World."

"Treasure! What kind of Treasure! What-what-what!" Naruto shouted. Unconsciously clinging to the distraction from within his lost mind.

"22 years ago, now. There was one man who did the impossible. A Pirate, who led his crew on a voyage to conquer the entire Grand Line. A man who was so strong, so powerful and so dangerous, he bent all of the seas to his will. And defeated every opponent he found along the way. To the point that he earned a Title nobody ever carried before. The King of the Pirates. Gold Roger."

"Gold Roger himself was from the East Blue. He achieved more wealth, fame and power than anyone else did. He defeated every fellow Pirate he encountered, and the most anyone could hope was to match him. The Marines finally managed to defeat and capture him and sentenced the man to death. But before his capture. Gold Roger took everything that was worth taking from the world. And hid it away. An enormously vast treasure. The Legendary One Piece."

"Whoever finds that treasure will be acknowledged as the Next King of the Pirates. Thousands of Pirates crews have travelled to the Grand Line to find the One Piece. Fighting each other, the Marines, and the Elements all the way. To the point that the Grand Line is a constant battlefield."

"Sometimes I'm amazed that Zeff even survived for years in that hell."

The Genin were left gapping at the story. Even in their bleak setting, stories of Pirates, treasure and adventure brought a glint of excitement to their young minds.

While Kakashi was more observant. "I apologize, Tarm. You just mentioned someone named Zeff went there?"

"Hmmm? Oh, yes." The headman nodded. "There is a former Pirate I met a few years ago. The man was called Red-foot Zeff. He retired from that life over 10 years past. Opened a sea restaurant called the Baratie. He knows a lot more about the Grand Line than I do, no doubt there. If you want to know if your home is on the Grand Line, Zeff would be the best person to meet."

"The four of you are welcome to stay here as long as you want. Or you could head to the Baratie and meet him in person, hopefully find a way back home."

Kakashi nodded, assessing their options. Then he came to a decision. "Alright. Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura." All of the Genin looked to their sensei, this time Sasuke actually did move his head. "We'll stay here in Jeeha Village for two days. Rest and prepare in this time, then we head to the Baratie using one of the smaller boats from the Pirate ship. For now let's get some food and find a place to sleep. And I do not want anyone shelling out blame or accusations at each other, at all."

Once the Genin had nodded, Sakura twice, Kakashi released her. Watching them depart, the grey-haired Copy-nin dropped in

exhaustion.

'Why do they have to be so much work. Leading ANBU squads or working with Chunin didn't need that much attention for each member. I don't like having to be that hands-on with them at all. But since I'm the.....the only one here.'

Soon the Jonin's head was buried in his hands. 'I'm going to have to work harder with each of them. Since I'm the only ninja here that can teach them anything about ninja arts at all. It's not just about Sasuke and his Sharingan anymore, but Naruto and Sakura might need more attention too, until we find a way to get back to the village.'

"Savio.....Mr. Kakashi. Are feeling alright?"

"Fine, Mr. Tarm. Just....fine," the lazy Hatake bemoaned. Glancing back to the door, Kakashi reflected on his Genin.

'This really is the kind of situation I do not want to deal with. Our situation probably hasn't even sunk in yet and they are already in bad shape. Sasuke was almost unresponsive from the shock. Sakura turned into a volatile wreaking ball, and Naruto looked like the ground was falling away underneath him.'

'Still... The three of them did pull it together when it really counted in the Land of Waves. And they get along much better than I did with Rin and Obito.'

Kakashi smiled at the memories of his team outmanoeuvring Zabuza, Sasuke protecting Naruto, Sakura helping Naruto climb a tree, and shedding tears after the battle passed.

'I'm confident they'll ban together, and remember my lessons about comrades and loyalty.'

Of course, Kakashi could have been more wrong. Blinded by his lifelong, terrible case of emotional constipation.

End.

[1]-While One Piece does have a broader range of material culture, Naruto primarily uses Japanese or Chinese cultural materials. Including different types of houses, ships, religions, customs, clothing, and weapon styles. I found it could be a plot hole if Kakashi would recognize a cutlass.

[2]-Naruto Shippuden, episode 180. "Inari's Courage put to the Test." Or Manga chapter #451.

[3]-Yes. I wanted a catchy name for these pirates, and came up with a blend of the Uchiha and Uzumaki symbols. Cringy, yes I admit it. Sue me.

[4]-A style of sailing ship, popular in the 16th and 17th centuries A two-masted ship that could be powered by oars. Giving them good speed and maneuverability. Distinguished by a square-rigged sail, and popular among pirates for their speed, maneuverability and easy handling. Generally Smaller than a Brig, yet bigger than a sloop.

[5]-The Pumpkin Pirates characters from the Rainbow Mist Arc.

Please, type a Review about anything you enjoyed or disliked.

Author's Note: I want to establish something crucial about Team 7: timeframe. I have snatched Team 7 (Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke, Kakashi) away from their universe deliberately at the close of the Nami no Kuni (Land of Water) Arc. Each of these four are, at this stage, confined to their abilities and perspectives and characterization from this period in the Naruto storyline.

No Chunin exams, no Curse-seal for Sasuke, no Rasengan, no Kamui for Kakashi, no medical training for Sakura, has Sasuke not been exposed to Tsykynomi for the 2nd time by Itachi. And character growth or habits which emerge or decline in or post-Chunin Exams have not happened. Their characterizations and abilities lack the

developments which occurred across 99% of the entire manga and anime.

Any later in the Naruto storyline, Team 7 can handle some of the Paradise half of the Grand Line, or get lucky and run all the way to Sabaohoady Archipelago. Then get their asses handed to them in the New World or the Whitebeard War, and require a lot of Plot armour to avoid death.

So I took the earliest versions of Team 7, fresh outta the Academy, very immature (Sakura especially and Naruto craving attention and with unhealthy competition towards Sasuke), and where they have the most potential for character growth. On the downside, take most of what you remember Team 7 is capable of doing, and flush it down the toilet: no Rasengan, no Chidori, no Toad summons, no super-strength for Sakura, Sasuke has only re-awakened his Sharingan during the fight with Haku, and Kakashi is only slightly above Zabuza, not somebody who can fight Akatsuki agents 2-on-1 in Shippuden series.

Plus, One Piece has some of the most detailed, complex and consistent power-grinding in any fantasy series created. Throw any of Naruto's main cast through that crucible, and can become Kage-class if they survive to the New World. Sasuke and Naruto post-Chunin Exams could fight off Don Krieg or Arlong, and they'd be excited to do it; compromising Luffy's own major fights or how the rest of the Straw hat pirate grow.

Kakashi learns to be a sensei

Chapter 3:

Kakashi learns about being a sensei.

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

""Inner thoughts""=images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Four days had passed since the fight with the Swirl-Fan Pirates.

Currently, Team 7 were travelling to the Baratie on smooth waters. Kakashi was lounging at the bow, but without any books out, instead glancing over his Genin periodically: Sakura's face was buried in a book. While Sasuke scanned the coastline. And Naruto was doing push-ups on the deck.

'I never imagined ANBU training for missions in the Land of Water, or any coastal reconnaissance, would wind up put to use. If I was, correct, we should reach this Baratie by tomorrow.' The Jonin sighed lightly as he glanced around. Nobody was speaking with anyone, but Kakashi was grateful for the lighter moods each of them displayed.

The first couple of days had gone badly for each of them.

The reality that they may be in a separate dimension truly sunk in over the course of the following day after their happenchance rescue. The villagers heaped praises and gifts to the Shinobi, but none of the ninjas were truly in the mood to accept them. Kakashi

had initially kept the Genin separated. Yet, one night, he found Naruto crying his eyes out. Recalling a certain conversation with Inari, Kakashi became worried and approached the boy.

Drip-Drip. "chk-aah-ckeheh-cheemmmm"-sniff.

"Naruto?"

Slowly, the lost child glanced up, at the familiar voice. Blinking to clear his eyes, he recognized the figure of his sensei, squatting down beside him.

"Listen." Kakashi began. "This is a huge shock to all of us. But I don't want you to blame yourself over that Genie. We're here and need to look ahead right now. Not back on what could have been different. I don't want these feelings of pain or regret holding you back so much. We'll find a way back, no matter how long it'll take."

The Hatake smiled, trying to drive his words further with a happy memory. "Then you'll be able to tell Lord Hokage all about-"

"AAAAHHHHHHEEEEE!" Naruto broke out in a sob. His head was bent down, tears streaming from his eyes. Kakashi was confused. Unsure of what he said, or how to approach the boy.

Hesitantly, cautiously. He reached out to touch Naruto's shoulder. The boy shrugged away from his touch, moaning. "Old Man....sniff....Old Man."

Given his mistake, Kakashi decided to wait instead of speaking. 'I... Hhhhhh. I guess I'll see what comes and try to help.' With a sigh, the Jonin resigned himself to something he was always reluctant to do. Talk. About feelings and pain.

"Naruto. What is it about the Hokage that's bothering you so much?"

At the mention of his single guiding figure, Naruto began to cry harder.

Several moments passed. Kakashi began to stand up.

"Don't go," the boy murmured. "Please, don't go sensei. You're....you're the only one who likes me now. The only one who doesn't glare at me. Like the Hokage used to in the village."

Kakashi's eye widened. Slipping back to the ground, he decided to try his luck. "Glares? Who was glaring at you Naruto?"

Sniff-"Sakura and Sasuke. They... sniff-they blame me for being stuck here. I know that it is kinda my fault, but....but they're looking at me just like everyone else in the village does. Everybody is back in the Leaf Village. Heh.....heh-sniff.....They look at me like that all the time! Like a germ, like a monster, something they want to make disappear, or someone to blame for everything because of the Kyubi!"

"Huh!" Naruto gasped in apprehension. Jarring sideways, he faced Kakashi. Eyed filled with terror. He'd let that secret slip. His body was trembling, overcome with fear.

'Please-please-howcouldI-I-I-besostupid. I-Italkedaboutthataloudandnowsensei-'

"Naruto." Kakashi's call was ignored. "Naruto! Naruto!"

Every call from the Jonin bounced away. Naruto was consumed with panic. Backing away from his teacher. With a reluctant sigh. The Jonin shifted forward. Kakashi's touch was shrugged off again. Leading the Jonin into a flash from his past.

Vividly, a memory, shaded with grief, came to the surface. Of a certain red-haired woman pulling him into her arms. In the wake of Rin's death, the teenaged Kakashi rejected any touch from her. But Uzumaki Kushina wasn't the person to accept the answer 'no' from anyone.

The friend-killer remembered her yanking him into her arms. Cradling his softly, whispering assurance that she did not blame him. And to let the pain out of his heart. He'd rejected her advice, he still felt some comfort from her touch.

Now, here he was. Trying to do the same to her son.

"Naruto." Kakashi spoke more forcefully. Spurred by the memory, he moved forward. Wrapping an arm around the boy and pressing his head into Kakashi's shoulder. The movements were very awkward for the Jonin, even more as he began to speak.

"Naruto. I already knew about the burden, sealed within you, when I became your Jonin-sensei. I....I probably should have said something earlier. I don't see you as the Kyubi-Kitsune at all. You're one of my cute, little Genin. And one of my comrades. Do you remember what I said at the Bell-test, and in our first encounter with Zabuza?"

Naruto wasn't crying anymore. The sensation.....

'What... this is what... I....sensei....'

The boy listened carefully. Gripping each of Kakashi's words tightly.

"Naruto?" Shifting his head, the boy's blue eyes met Kakashi's single grey one. "When you became my Genin. I said that anyone who abandons their friends, are lower than scum. And against, Zabuza, I swore to protect you, along with Sakura, Sasuke and Tazuna."

"Being a Jinchuriki doesn't matter to me at all. You're still my student. That won't ever change."

At those words, Naruto felt a new sensation flooding his heart. Up until then, only Iruka and the Hokage had shown such unconditional care for him. To hear it from Kakashi was.....

... indescribable.

Tears of joy began to creep into the corner of his eyes. But the boy quickly blinked them away. After taking a moment, he glanced back at his sensei.

"Sensei... I feel really bad because now you, Sasuke and Sakura are stuck here with me. But what hurts more than that. Is that...is that if we really are in another world. Then I can't become the Hokage at all. That was my dream for so long. Especially when other people glared at me. Before I knew I even was a Jinchuriki."

Kakashi's eye grew wide. 'So that's it. His goal, the icon that held him together, is missing. So now there's nothing for him to focus on.'

Once he reached that realization, the Jonin had somewhere to start from. Kakashi spoke with Naruto for a while. Giving the blonde some reassurance and reminding him that they shouldn't give up on their ambitions so easily.

"Naruto. If you really believe that you can become the Hokage. Then we have even more reason to work to find a way back home. It might take a long while, but it's still a long way from being impossible. We will make it back to the Leaf Village. And we need to stay together to do it. Can I count on you to do that? For me? And for the Hokage?"

At his last words, Naruto became confused. "Uhhhhhh. How does Old-Man even know where we are?"

"Hmhmhmhm," Kakashi chuckled. "He'll definitely send some people to look for us if we don't return to the village soon. What I meant was that the Hokage wouldn't want you to stay down a beat yourself up. He'd tell you that a Ninja is one who endures, for a purpose or goal. Our goal is to find a way to get back home, and my goal is to do it so you can become the Hokage. Can you do that?"

Those words.....

....perked Naruto up like no others could.

With a rare, true smile on his face, the blonde stood up and nodded. "Ye-yeah! You can bet you can count on me, sensei! Believe it!"

Smiling at his student's demeanour, Kakashi led him back to the village. Yet, on the way, the pair passed by Sakura. At the sight of Naruto, her eyes darkened into pits of rage. Yet Kakashi's presence dissuaded the pinkette from trying anything.

This brought a fresh sigh from Kakashi. 'I hoped that talking to Naruto would solve everything. Hopefully these issues with Sakura will pass with time.'

The Jonin could not be more wrong. As the next day, a ruckus could be heard from the village. Initially, Kakashi thought it was a couple of children, but none of his Genin.

"Mr. Kakashi!" Glancing up the Jonin groaned, mixing disapproval and resignation.

A parent was leading Naruto and Sakura towards him, gripping both by the shoulders. Sakura was growling at Naruto, who sported a series of bruises on his face. Bruises that weren't there the night before.

"Hhhhhhh," the Jonin rose to his feet. 'Guess I'll need to deal with this.'

"Hello there, Mrs. Rei. I take it that noise was coming from my Genin?"

"Indeed. This girl was beating up the poor boy, claiming they were here because of his fault. When I ordered her to stop she even claimed he deserved it for being a selfish monster!"

There was more that followed, but Kakashi had tuned it out. Glaring at Sakura, the girl hmped and turned away. Her nose stuck to the sky, obsessed with her own blameless self-righteousness. While Naruto stood downcast but gradually lightened up at Rei's words.

"Why the girl has no right to talk like that about Naruto at all. After he saved my son from those pirates that attacked us, and has been so helpful repairing our home. There is nothing about him that could resemble a monster at all."

Naruto grinned at her words. Sakura opened her mouth, but Kakashi intervened.

"I see. Thank you for helping Naruto, Mrs. Rei. Would you mind helping him with those injuries?"

I need to have a talk with Sakura."

His serious tone sparked a shudder of fear in the pinkette. As Naruto left with the woman, Kakashi grabbed Sakura's arm and Shunshined away to the forest.

Standing in the trees, the Jonin let go of her arm and leaned back.
"Sakura. What did I-"

"Sensei! How can you do this!" The girl shouted indignantly. "Just because you say it doesn't mean that we aren't stuck here because of Naruto's selfishness! All of us were close to getting back home when that idiot found the bottle instead of just leaving it alone! And then he just made a wish for adventures and now, we probably aren't even in the same world that home is! And now-"

Kakashi listened to her rant, trying to be patient. Until the girl began to stride away from him.

"Sakura!" grabbing her attention, the Jonin pondered how to approach her feelings.

'ANBU teams were so much easier than this. All of them had some problems but never needed this much attention at all. Why do Naruto and Sakura need to be so demanding?'

"First, if you want to blame anyone for us getting stuck here, then you should blame me. I am the one who gave Naruto the idea to wish for more adventures and ways to grow stronger in the first place. And I didn't stop him from making that wish either. Plus-"

The man scratched his head, embarrassingly.

"I did take one of those wishes for more Icha-Icha books. That might have been useful to get us back home. Although, to get the latest one three years early...."

A bright blush shone through the pervert's mask.

"UUHHHHHAAAAAAAAA!" A loud, winy cry tore through the forest.

"That's Not The Point Sensei! The Point Is That We're Stuck Here, That Naruto Made That Wish, And That Sasuke's Mad At Me, And I Can't See My Mom Or Dad Anymore And We're Completely Cut-Off From Anyone Help Or backup in a Strange New....hehehe... New World Where We Don't Know Good Guys From Bad Guys, And Have No Concrete Way To Get Home!"

The girl began panting halfway through her rant. While Kakashi rubbed his throbbing eardrums. 'Where can I start from here. Wait....'

"Sasuke? How is he mad at you? And how is Naruto responsible for that?"

"He just is sensei!" the immature girl exclaimed.

"I was talking to Sasuke about how we were stuck here, cut off from any friends or family that we have. Naruto made that wish, and he's not worried at all because he doesn't have anyone in the Leaf Village to go back to."

"The Boy's an orphan so there aren't any parents for him to miss while we are here. So he's totally ignorant of how Sasuke-kun and I are feeling, so far away from anyone who cares about us, and that

we are missing as well. I bet you have family and friends back in the village that are worried about you too!"

Kakashi froze at those words, his patience slipping away. Rapidly growing shorter as Sakura continued her rant.

"It's just like when we were back at the academy! Naruto's so immature, careless, he never does any hard work and made a fool of himself. It's all because he wasn't raised right with a mother and father at all. Nobody to tell him how other people feel or to think about others than just himself and what he wants."

"I know it, and was talking about it to Sasuke-kun. He and I both have people back in the village that care about us, but nobody cares about Naruto. So he has it the easiest and he's not thinking about us at all."

At that point, Kakashi's face bent over, smacking into his palm. 'She....talked about having no parents....to Sasuke.'

The pinkette's back was turned away. Her eyes closed while gesturing around to vent her chaotic frustrations.

"Then Sasuke-kun got mad and told me to shut up about Naruto. He even..."

The girl paused, her hands dropping to rub a bruise on her stomach.

"Sasuke-kun... hit me. And told me I didn't know anything and was as bad as Naruto. He even said that-"

"What!" Kakashi cut through Sakura's mood.

A fresh breeze passed through the trees, sharp as a razor knife. Sakura froze in place, glancing up timidly.

Now, Things were serious. Kakashi was mad.

"Ummm. S-S-Sasuke-kun h-hit me. He-He said I w-was just as bad a-as Nar-Naruto-baka."

Kakashi groaned. Filled with frustration, disappointment and anger.

'So much for teamwork.'

"I'll speak with him. And take care of this Sakura."

"Oh, Good!" the girl cried in excitement. "So you're finally going to punish Naruto for his selfish screw-up!"

Within her head, Inner-Sakura was cheering as a chibi-Naruto was beaten up by a chibi-Kakashi. 'Chaaa-That'll be the best! Naruto will finally-"

"Sakura!"

The girl came back to her sense, stumbling back in fear. The Jonin towered over her, his single eye dark and foreboding. A cold, piercing demeanour pulsed from him. The man, was angry.

"Listen, and do not miss a... single... word... from... me."

"Believe me, it takes a lot to get me to lose my temper, little girl. And even more for me to actively despise someone. But your actions and words are now close to accomplishing both."

"First. You actually think Naruto is happy that he is an orphan. Or that there is nobody around for him at all?! Did you forget that Sasuke is the same!"

"The Entire Uchiha clan, Sasuke's own family. All of them are dead. He is just as much of an orphan as Naruto is. Did you ever think of how similar they are, and how much your words about having no family can hurt Sasuke!?"

Sakura's mind froze. A chilling wall of ice grasped her emotions. Her heart began to sink, down a deep endless hole of despair.

"We are here, yes. We are cut off from the Leaf Village, yes. Will we get back or move on somewhere by blaming each other?" The Jonin paused, waiting for an answer.

"I asked you a question, Sakura. And expect an answer in return."

"N-n-b-(sniff)-No." The girl squeaked.

Kakashi leaned back, giving the girl some room to breathe. Yet, his anger remained present.

"If it was, each of us could blame you for wasting the second one of the Genie's wishes. A wish that could have been used to take us back to the village. Does Naruto blame you for wasting that wish like Sasuke does?"

"No," the man continued. Kakashi was too far gone to wait for any reply.

"As for Naruto not having anyone in the village who cares for him. Gloating over that is disgraceful and disgusting for any Shinobi to say. Naruto is always alone, and beneath that smile, he is deeply depressed and isolated. But, he endures it. Everyone in the village knows about him and would wish for him to be kicked out of the village. Some would even celebrate if he was murdered. He has suffered, in ways that would break you, and many other people."

"In all honesty, the singular worst person on this team. And the one who has hurt both him and Sasuke more than anyone else. Is you."

Kakashi's anger spilt out through his words. Recalling the same comments from her while spying on his team prior to the Bell test. The man's rarely-felt emotions were now dictating his words, without much care for what he revealed.

"You have been cared for, loved, praised, and protected by a loving family all your life. If you were in trouble, other people came to help.

Or you could run to safety in someone's arms. You have been sheltered from many deep, harsh realities of the world."

"Sasuke and Naruto have nobody. Their families were stolen from them, and they would give anything to see their parents again. On the day you were assigned to a team, you even had the gall to say that Naruto was lucky to not have any family. Ever since we became a team, Naruto has asked to spend time with you just as you have demanded from Sasuke. And you hit, throw or kick Naruto away in response."

"Nobody has ever been as physically abusive towards Naruto as you are, Sakura. Even after a battle, you run to Sasuke despite the fact Naruto could be hurt as well. You abandoned your comrades...."

Those accusations echoed through Kakashi. His tirade was cut short. Glancing down, he saw the terror and hurt in Sakura's eyes.

"HHHHhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

Fwoomp.

Kakashi sighed deeply, dropping to the ground, overwhelmed. Wracked with guilt.

A long minute passed, with Sakura recalling all of her sensei's accusations, and Kakashi wracked with guilt.

"Sakura," he spoke up. In a far gentler tone.

"I will admit. I guess, I am partly to blame. For letting those incidents happen instead of addressing them sooner. And scolding you is more than a little hypocritical.

But no more. I will not allow you to hurt Naruto in any way, from now on. Is that clear?"

"Y-y-y-yes-se-sensei..." The girl sputtered out, past the lump in her throat.

Locking eyes with the pinkette, Kakashi saw the deep fear he had sparked in her. Driving his personal guilty deeper.

Crawling to his feet, the Jonin stepped forward.

The girl tried to step back, fearful of her sensei's next choice. Until she found herself wrapped in a light, apologetic hug. The minuscule warmth clashed with her frozen state. Causing her to tremble.

Kakashi was deeply shaken. Bewildered over why he reacted so passionately.

'Why. Why did I become so angry?'

Think back to her words, Kakashi was at a loss over his own reaction. 'She was talking about guilt, blame, orphans, par-....parents.'

The image of Sakumo Hatake, and Kakashi's life after the White Fang's suicide, came into his head.

'So that's why I became so angry at her words. Those emotions. The lonesomeness and betrayal after...'

"Sakura." Let going of her, Kakashi knelt down, placing one hand on her shoulder. Lightly boring into her eyes.

"You are the only person between the Genin of this team, who has had any support or stability in their lives. Naruto and Sasuke have both suffered, but their goals and ambitions prevented them from falling into despair and anger. Now. Those goals have been ripped away."

"That is why Sasuke's lashed out at you."

The girl's eyes widened. Looking up, her eyes met Kakashi's. Conveying a serious message to her.

"Do you remember his words to you, that day you were assigned to Team 7? When you first talked to him about Naruto not having any parents?"

A few moments passed. The girl's eyes grew wide remembering a promise she made to herself. 'He. Sasuke-kun said I was annoying, and it hurt.... After that I....I promised to start treating Naruto nicer. And I've broken that promise.'

"I....I remember....sensei," she whispered.

"Good. Now, Naruto is feeling the same way as Sasuke. The difference between them is, that I talked to him yesterday and helped to alleviate those feelings. But with Sasuke....."

"Sakura. Tell me exactly what Sasuke said after he hit you?"

With a few gulps to clear away the lump in her throat, Sakura softly murmured.

"W... well... He said that if Naruto had given him the w... wish from the Genie, then he's have been closer to his goal. But now he... he can't, because the certain someone that Sasuke-kun wants to k... (gulp)... to kill is too far away for him to touch even if he did grow stronger."

'So know....Sasuke's lost as well. But unlike Naruto's despair, his anger doesn't have a goal to focus on and has started to lash out. Hhhhhhh.' Kakashi acknowledged.

'I... I guess... I'll have to talk to him as well.'

"I'll talk to Sasuke about that. But for you." His grip on her shoulder tightened.

"No more. Trying to complain about anything around Sasuke will only bring him and you more suffering. And with Naruto. You will not

strike, blame, or do anything that would hurt him at all. If something would endanger him or someone else, then you can pull him back, or come and get me. Understood?"

After Sakura nodded in response. Kakashi sent her back to the village.

Once the girl was out of sight, Kakashi slumping to the ground. Think back to his own Jonin-sensei.

'I never thought that being a sensei meant dealing with all these problems. Things were so easier on teams with more Jonin or in the ANBU. How.....'

'How did sensei deal with all of this between me and Ob... Obito? Somehow he could always bring our fights to an end so casually.'

Dragging himself to his feet, the man moved on to his most difficult student.

He found Sasuke, taking a long walk through the forests. Even without a Sharingan, Kakashi clearly saw the clenching shoulders, the rigid steps, and the flowing stains on his cheeks.

The strain and anger carried by the boy was palpable in the air.

'So. No Itachi to focus on, and his emotions become so volatile he has no control over himself.'

The Jonin-sensei took a moment. Recalling how he had approached Sakura and Naruto.

'One of them doesn't really hide what they are thinking, but keeps their feelings under a tight lock. The other was all too willing to express herself to anyone available, and lash out instead of looking at her own issues. Sasuke barely shows any emotions but pride, frustration or anger. Maybe it won't be a good idea to just wing, this.'

Stepping out on the branch, he called to the Uchiha.

Sasuke stopped, turning to face Kakashi. Who saw his fears confirmed in the eyes he met. Behind the unflinching gaze, lay a silhouette of the pressure within Sasuke's mind. Almost ready to explode.

"What do you want, Kakashi!"

"I was just talking to Sakura," the Jonin nonchalantly answered. "She mentioned some, very hurtful words that caused quite a violent reaction from you.

Don't worry. She was in the wrong, and I scolded her for it. But for now, I want to talk about you."

Sasuke froze at the mention of that incident. His left fist, the one he sunk into Sakura's gut, clenched at the memory. "Hh. I've got nothing to say to you. And I don't... grrr... don't want to share any words. I'm... rrr....fine, and there's nothing for you to say."

As Sasuke stepped away, Kakashi decided to test the waters.

"Really. Striking a comrade isn't really acceptable behaviour from the Rookie of the Year. Nor is it something I will let you walk away from. Naruto already had the courage to share his feelings with me, and felt more than a little better afterwards. Especially since he's cut off from his goal as well and-"

"Shut up!" Sasuke angrily proclaimed, facing away from Kakashi, his body trembled volatily. "That Loser and I are completely different in our goals. His is a fantasy that can't ever be reached. My is an ambition that will come to reality. He wants people to admire him, and I don't care about what others think about me. We're both orphans, so yeah I got angry when I heard Sakura complaining. But I knew all of my family and my clan! And all of them were stolen from me by....."

The image of Itachi dominated Sasuke's thoughts. Almost taunting how he was now so far away, and still hasn't paid for what he did to

their clan.

"I was so close. So close to finally having the power to make him pay. Naruto and Sakura stole the opportunity out from under me. And now I'm stranded here, far away from wherever he is. And I still haven't made him pay for what he did to my clan."

Sasuke took another step. Moving further away from Kakashi.

While the Jonin eyed his student, carefully.

'Alright. I have at least one angle to approach from. And, this is another talk that is probably overdue.'

The man waited, spying a large tree in Sasuke's path, and came to a decision.

Once the Uchiha was close, a trail of Ninja-wire sprung out. Encircling the tree and the boy, who found himself pinned down within a second. Once enough wire covered the Genin, Kakashi pulled it taut.

"Grrrr! Grrrrrr! What!? Let me out!" Sasuke began to thrash, wildly.

"How could I have been trapped like this!? How!? Naruto, come out and finish this prank, you Loser!"

"Sasuke." Kakashi called his attention. As his student faced him, the Jonin-sensei met a pair of sharingans blazed with anger.

"Look. I'm not the kind of person to talk about personal issues. Nor do I like to probe into someone else's at all. But, I still have to live up to my own rules."

"Those who break the Rules are scum. But. Those who abandoned others. Are worse than scum. There are a lot of different ways someone can be abandoned. And I'm guilty of all of them. But that is why I looked at those past failures and want to avoid them as much as I can."

"What does that have to do with me!" Sasuke shouted. "You just acknowledged that Sakura was the one at fault, so she needed some sense to be knocked into her! She wasted one wish that could have been saved to get us back to the Village! And Naruto brought us here with the last one!"

His teeth clenched in fury, nearly cracking one of them.

"I never even wanted to be with this team in the first place! I am an Avenger, and I need to become stronger than my prey. I was about to wish for someone who could teach me what I needed to learn to destroy Itachi-....."

Sasuke grew pale and silent. Mentioning his brother by name, for the first time in five years.

"Itachi?" Kakashi coaxed.

"Don't you dare mention his name!" the Avenger, roared. His Sharingan blazing.

"HHHHhhhhhhhhhhhh."

"You truly hate him that deeply don't you." It was a statement, not a rhetorical question.

"Sasuke. I want you to do something for me. And I won't accept no for an answer," the Jonin's promised, tightening the string.

"I want you to tell me everything..."

Hhhhhh....everyone that happened that night of the massacre."

"Don't argue," he cut off the boy's refusal.

"This is eating you up inside. Making you unfocused and weak. Think about it, how easily did I catch you with these wires when you already knew I was here? You're a talented kid, and very advanced for your age. Nobody can deny that. But focusing on your ambition

too much made you lose sight of your surroundings and walk right into my trap."

Sasuke's frown darkened, before growing softly at those words. Now, part of his anger was directed at himself.

Kakashi noticed how much his praise alleviated the boy's darkness, and offered a compromise.

"But, I'm not an unfair person. Asking you to reveal the darkest day of your life is a hefty request. So."

Kakashi took a deep breath. Followed by two more.

Bracing himself for what was to come.

"So I'll share my own worst memory with you. Well...." Closing his eye in response.

"One of the-"

"Shut up!" Sasuke shouted, aggression and outrage dominating his voice.

"What Makes You Think You Know Anything About It! It's Easier For You To Talk, Nothing In Your Life Can Ever Compare To Me! Nobody Else Has Ever Lost Their Entire Family Like I Did! Everything Single Person I Knew And Cared About Was Destroyed! By The Man I Admired The Most In This World! You Can't Compare To That!"

Sasuke's voice began to grow deep, etched with iron-clad conviction in his words. But just as the metal can be, Sasuke's beliefs were strong yet brittle. They could not bend and would be broken sharply under the right conditions.

"Maybe If I Came And Killed Everyone Who's Ever Meant Anything To You, Then You'd Understand Me! Maybe Then I'd Listen To You. Then, You'd Have Some Idea Of How I Feel."

Kakashi nodded, in agreement.

"That might be true. It's an interesting theory. But I'm afraid it wouldn't really work, even if we were back in the Leaf Village. You're a little late to put it to the test."

"You see. Everyone that you're already talking about....has already died."

Sasuke's eyes shot open, wide with surprise. His body was still, the tense anger blocked by pure shock.

"Sasuke. Every. Single. Person. Who I have cared that deeply about. Has been dead for more than 10 years past. I've been around longer than you have, kid. And I've seen... well... a lot more than my share of troubles. You're not the only one who's lost somebody. Or the only one who has lost every single person they deeply cared for."

"And the first person I lost..." Kakashi's voice faltered.

He succeeded in breaking the cloud of anger with Sasuke. But needed to go a step further.

"Hhhhhhhhhh. And the first one of them to die. Was someone I admired more than anyone else. And yet he betrayed me with his death."

"That man was my father. Hatake Sakumo. Tell, me Sasuke. Have you ever...

Kakashi's voice faltered again, struggling to speak past old wounds of loss and regret.

'This is harder than I thought. And I knew it would be very, very difficult.'

"Have you ever heard of the White Fang of the Leaf?"

The boy shook his head, almost in a daze.

"I thought so. That was the name other people gave my father. Many admired his skill and talents in battle. No one more so than I. In fact, even the Fourth Hokage once praised that my father made even the Sannin pale in comparison."

"Everyone looked up to my father. Especially me. I measured everything I did against him, and wanted to surpass him. Mostly because other people always measured my abilities against his. Being... trapped in his shadow was a strange case. I loved it more than anything, yet my desire was to grow beyond it. To make him and other people recognize me as better than him."

"Every word that my father spoke was something I took to heart. Tell me, does this sound familiar, Sasuke?"

The Genin had begun to tremble. Not from rage or confusion, but awe and pain. Sasuke's mind was so dazed, the boy nodded at Kakashi's words. Recalling his own adoration of Itachi.

Kakashi continued.

"I see. My mother died when I was very young. To the point that my father raised me on his own. Until-(huh)....

Until he was the first... one... to... die. By... (huh... gulp... huh)... by taking his own....life."

Now Sasuke gasped. He found it unfathomable. A Great Ninja, one higher than even the Sannin. Taking their own life.

Kakashi barely noticed it. A tear, trickled from his eye. The man was barely able to stand, his threatening the break. The man spoke of his own memories and feelings so rarely, calling them back was pushing his mind to the breaking point. So, the Jonin fell on practised habits, cutting himself off from his feelings, to complete the job he had set for himself.

"It happened when I was 7 years old.[1] Almost the same age you were at the massacre. There was an incident on a mission, and my father was blamed for it. Everyone in the village turned against him, angry at how their hero had betrayed them. In the end, the shame was so much."

"After my father took his own life, I became obsessed with becoming the perfect ninja. I followed every rule in the book. Chastised everyone for doing the wrong things. I became obsessed with my goal, driven by how much I hated my father, for betraying everything I left towards him."

"In the end. That same attitude....."

"It. Caused. Every. One. Of. My. Team. To Die. Their deaths are my fault, Sasuke. Because I was the same as you are. You cling to your hatred and need for revenge because it is the only way to keep you from falling into despair."

Silence. Unnerving.

Oppressing.

Several moments passed.....

Followed by more. And more, all in the silence between both men. As Kakashi tried to regain some composure with his emotions, these revelations sunk into Sasuke.

"Ch... CH... Ahhh.....He....."

Sasuke clenched his eyes shut. Cursing his sensei for binding his arms. Trying to blink them.

He failed, and a series of tears leaked from his eyes. Following the bridge of his nose, and dropping to the ground.

Kakashi ignored the tears, out of respect. Then continued.

"You and I certainly haven't had a charmed life, exactly. We both had talents that were thought of as prodigious in our studies at the Academy. And led to others developing admiration, envy or jealousy for them. Yet, all that we cared about were our own skills and to follow the examples set forth by men we idolized."

"Men who betrayed us, leaving us lost, confused, and filled with anger. Now Sasuke. You heard about my life. And we're not leaving this place until you tell me about the night of the massacre."

With that, the clearing grew silent. Sasuke was struggling to breathe. The shock of how accurate Kakashi's revelations coaligned with the Uchiha's rocked him to his core. While the memories of his own worst nightmare threatened to spill out even more shame, sadness and regret from his heart.

Kakashi was patient. Even as 30 minutes passed, he didn't move.

Until his patience paid off.

Slowly. Hesitantly. Sasuke began to talk about that day. How he had found his home littered with bodies. Where he found his brother. What Itachi had done to him afterwards. From there, Sasuke's anger began to grow again, talking about his pledge to hunt and destroy Itachi. No matter what. Before recalling where he and Kakashi were, and trembling with rage.

Kakashi was shaken to his core.

'This....the Tsukoyomi. I read of it back when I was learning about Sharingan. But I never imagined the truth, or that Itachi had administered it to Sasuke. And on top of that, I was wrong.'

Kakashi hung his head but kept a firm grip on the wire binding Sasuke to the tree.

'I'm going to have to think about this a lot. But for now....'

"Sasuke. Do you recall how I talked about building yourself up through missions, training, and overcoming danger?"

Facing the Jonin, Sasuke nodded.

"I will confess. I was something of a hypocrite back then. I was planning on just having our team doing more D-rank missions for a long while. I wasn't even planning on any extra training back in the village. We succeeded in the Land of Waves and I didn't see any reason the change a system that worked."

"But now. Now things are different. We're stuck in a pretty dangerous place. But unlike back there, we don't have a village to fall back to if things become too dangerous. We only have each other to count on. And I need to make sure you, Sakura and Naruto can depend on each other. It might be the only way to ensure that we can survive long enough to find a way back to the village. I need to trust that you will care and support us, not just yourself. Otherwise, you are no different than Itachi."

"Stop!" Kakashi forcibly cut-off the shout on Sasuke's lips.

"Getting angry at me won't change that truth. If you focus only on yourself and your lost ambitions, then you are no different from Itachi. And no different from how I was when my own feelings caused every one of my teammates to die."

"I was listening to you. Itachi's words truly have imprinted themselves in your heart. His challenge for you to grow, and try to kill him by filling yourself with hatred. But. Have you ever thought about doing something different, Sasuke?"

"I'm not talking about giving up on revenge. I'm talking about defying what Itachi told you to do. Gaining the Mangekyo Sharingan would mean killing someone that you care about. That could include Naruto and Sakura. But that is not who you are. When we encountered the Demon Brothers or faced Zabuza and Haku on the bridge. Were you thinking about Itachi at all?"

"N.....no." Sasuke confessed.

"And do you regret anything there? Even when you jumped in front of Naruto, to protect him. Do you regret that at all?"

Kakashi had a plan. And was praying for it to work.

"No. What is this about?" Sasuke replied.

"Well, to start. You did defeat two Chunin single-handedly in the first case. But, in the second one, it means that you were content in that moment. And it was where you risked losing both your life and your revenge to save Naruto. Plus, that is where you awakened your sharingan, at long last. When he was the furthest thing from your thoughts."

Slowly, Sasuke's eyes changed. Not into a dojutsu, but a new light flickered in them. Kakashi decided to press the topic home.

"The one time when you weren't focusing on Itachi was during that mission. And, you performed spectacularly. Even in our encounter with Zabuza, you and Naruto deceived and outmanoeuvred him. Someone as dangerous as me. And later, it was after Naruto arrived that your Sharingan awakened. You grew more powerful through fighting with a comrade, instead of ignoring them. Something that contradicts Itachi's words."

"To tell you the truth, Sasuke. Itachi ruined your life enough as it is. So why should you follow his words and his instructions if they came from the source of the destruction of your clan?"

Those words broke through. Sasuke could literally feel a fresh creak in his mind. All his life... he'd never thought to defy his brother at all. Nor did he actually question why he was following a murderer's advice.

Finally. At long last, Kakashi released the ninja wire. Letting Sasuke fall to the ground, completely slack.

"You could still follow Itachi's words, Sasuke. Or, you could prove that he was wrong. And find a different way to prove that."

"I want you to think about everything I've said. But be warned,"

Sasuke's head rose, facing the Lethal Copy-nin. Catching the tone of his words, cold and harder than steel.

"I will not let you hurt Naruto or Sakura anymore. Someone like Itachi would hurt them, even kill them for getting in the way of their ambitions. Do you truly want to become the very man you hate and despise so deeply? Or do you want to lose even more people in your life than you already have?"

"We will find a way back to the village, Sasuke. But we need to depend on each other to get there. I'll leave you to think about it."

The Jonin Shunsined away, leaving Sasuke to his thoughts.

Back in the village, he entered the house Tarm had loaned to the Ninja.

Where he collapsed, exhausted and drained from the emotional talk.

Flashback end.

Now, in the middle of the sea, Kakashi looked over his Genin. 'All of those conversations really took their toll on me. And to think such problems were simmering just below the surface, for each of them. None of them should have gotten that far out of hand in the first place.'

'Still,' his eyes casting around the calm setting. 'Now they are interacting more amicably than ever before. And my bonds towards each of them individually have grown from those forced conversations. Maybe this was for the better.'

Naruto had moved from push-ups to sit-ups. Taking his teacher's words to heart, the boy approach Kakashi before they left for advice

on how to improve and be of more help to everyone. The Jonin encouraged him to train and exercise more in case they were attacked by Pirates. The boat was quite small, leaving sparring out of the question. But it did have enough room for physical exercise and made taijutsu practice more difficult from the shifting balance on the waves.

Sasuke was gazing out to the horizon. Lost in deep thought, clearly trying to make sense of the eye-openers that Kakashi forced on him two days before. Still, the boy had given a quiet apology to Sakura one day passed. And carried himself differently than before.

While Sakura was trying something new. After surprising both Sasuke and Naruto with her own apologies, she held true to her promise to no longer hurt Naruto. Despite some very close calls out of old habits. Now, her nose was buried in a book from Tarm's collection to learn more about the Navy and the different islands in the world they planned to explore.

Deciding to take an optimistic stance towards his team, Kakashi nodded to himself.

Before-

"Hey! There's a ship off in the distance! Believe it!"

Sure enough, Kakashi saw Naruto pointing one hand at the outline of a ship against the horizon.

End.

In the original Naruto series, there never really was a scene where Naruto and Kakashi discussed how the latter viewed him relating to the Kyubi. I wanted to add that here, to keep both of them in character with their original selves. This is Kakashi as he was after the Land of Waves Arc, still a fresh Jonin-sensei, and Naruto after learning about Jinchuriki only weeks earlier.

As for the other scenes between teacher and student.

My personal belief for some of Kakashi's negligence as a sensei, was because he approached his team like others he had led as an ANBU Captain or Jonin-squad leader. Kakashi was a successful leader before Team 7 was assigned to him, but each of those teams would have been with Chunin, or fellow ANBU or Jonin. Mature and experienced shinobi, with their own training regimens and more crucially, their own support systems for personal problems. Factors that younger Genin wouldn't have, and Kakashi failed to comprehend. He led Team 7 just as he had led other squads throughout his career, without taking the more interpersonal and hands-on approach that each of them needed. And he largely avoided talking about personal problems until his hand was forced.

Personally, I do admire Kakashi as a great leader and a skilled teacher. But that really didn't happen unless it consisted of one-on-one training with his students. And his role in Sakura's training was never really depicted in the manga or the anime.

Here, that is the case. He's the only one for the Genin to turn to and can't deflect those responsibilities with a different mission or assignment; band-aide solutions. But, I do want to keep him in character; making any personal conversations awkward, unfamiliar and somewhat chaotic for him to approach.

Each of these will be the start of some long-term evolutions for each character. They are still the same people, though. Even Sasuke's desire for revenge won't be broken just overnight. But everything needs to start somewhere.

I only hope that I presented both him and his students in ways that were both authentic and personal for the readers.

[1]-Naruto Shippuden Episode 119. While speaking to Obito, Minato Namikazi stated Sakumo Hatake's suicide was 5 years ago. That mission was Kakashi's first as a Jonin, a rank he achieved at age 12. 5 years dialed back from 12, Kakashi would have been age 7. While

on Sasuke's side, when the original series began, he was aged 12 while Itachi was 17. There is a 5-year age gap between them, and the lore of Naruto stated Itachi was age 13 when he massacred the Uchiha clan, and the month of the Uchiha massacre was not specifically stated in sources that I am aware of. Doing the math, 17 years, reduce 13, there was 4-5 years between the Uchiha massacre and the premiere of Naruto. Adjusting for Sasuke's age, and the months where his birthday and the massacre happened in are both unknown, he would've been between age 7-8 when his family was killed.

The Baratie

Chapter 4:

The Baratie

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

""Inner thoughts""=images or memories within somebody's head.

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"So, this is the Baratie?" Sakura asked rhetorically. Gaping at the abstract design of the ship.

"I think it looks cool! And you definitely can't mistake or ignore it. Huh?"

Kakashi chuckled, "Well, Naruto. I guess there is some truth to your words."

"Hm. It looks a like a dork's playhouse. Can this place really be a restaurant?" Sasuke chimed in.

The floating restaurant had two masts, with sails coloured shades of pale and medium yellow. A fish's head made up the front, with an oversized rudder stylized as a caudal fin. The rest of the ship was a single 3-storey building, painted green and surrounded by a narrow deck.

As they approached, Kakashi instructed Sasuke and Naruto to each grab an oar and begin rowing in close. Near the docks, he readied a long coil of rope but-

"Hey! Whatcha rowing up there for?"

A large, oddly portioned figure called to them. The man had massive forearms, thin legs, and broad shoulders. Topped off by a buzz-cut, and a black, thin goatee. With two heart tattoos on his left arm.

"Is there a problem?" Kakashi inquired with their host.

"If you wanna dock at da restaurant, row around the back. That's where we tie off da boats, not loiterin' at the front door. Come around and I'll meet you there."

Kakashi nodded, angling the rudder while the boys continued to row. Soon the figure met them around back, calling for a morning line. Once the ship was tied off, he spotted Sakura.

"Well hello there, little pint-sized lady. I'm Patty, a cook here at the Baratie." Dashing forth, the man knelt, offering his hand.

"Please, accept my humble welcome to da Baratie, you troublesome hooligan. Please be welcome at this establishment, I offer you a nice meal, and my help to step aboard, you little fool."

Sakura... was... perplexed and mad at the name. "What was that you called me!?" Brushing the hand aside, she clumsily jumped the gap, nearly falling over.

Once she was aboard, the man rushed to the door. "Please, step inside, you whiny, tiny pre-teen. A table will be ready soon and-"

"Hey! Stop insulting Sakura-chan, big guy!" Naruto confronted him.

Immediately, the reception changed.

"What was that you damn crook! I was being nice to a rare female customer! Wait, you a customer too?" Patty confronted Naruto.

"Ummmmmm. Actually..." Kakashi interjected.

"We don't have much money to pay for a meal. We're here to-Whoa!"

At the words "no money" Patty was flying towards Kakashi. The Jonin nimbly dodged him, and the roundhouse punch that followed.

"Get out here, cheapskate! Our policy is to only serve paying customers here. So, if you can't pay, get back in ya boat, and get gone!"

The man took another swing at Kakashi, while the Genin moved to help.

Until an odd interruption.

"Get outa my restaurant! Drunk-eyes!"

"Whoa!"

With a splash, three figures were overboard.

After the first shout, a haggard, drunken man was kicked through the doors. Passing Sakura, missing Kakashi and Naruto, he struck Patty and Sasuke hit by the pair, launching all three for an unwelcome swim in the ocean.

"Sasuke!" "Sasuke!" the other Genin cried.

"Hey, Patty! Are you scaring away customers again?"

Through the doors, an old, rotund and powerful man stepped outside. Wearing a cook's outfit and a ridiculously high chef's hat. A pair of hard eyes locked on to Kakashi, while Sakura and Naruto helped Sasuke out of the water. Stroking a braided moustache with two bouncing points, the man swept his eyes out at his accidental victims.

"Huh. Sorry for the swim, little brat."

Naruto glared at the man. Before he froze and began to laugh out loud.

"Ghahahahahahahahahahaha! Wh-why do you have such a tall hat, Old guy?"

The chef frowned, halfway to kicking some manners into the boy. But settled for a light bonk on Naruto's head, using that same hat. "You disrespectful brat! I'm the chef here, Zeff. So of course, I get a tall chef's hat! So, are you guys customers here, or looking for something else?"

Kakashi, who had been watching silently, blinked at the name.

"As in Red-foot Zeff? The Pirate captain turned restaurateur?"

Zeff turned at the cool voice. "Who wants to know?" the man replied to the grey-haired ninja.

"Nobody looking for a fight. I'm a friend of Tarm. The four of us saved his village from a pirate crew a few days ago. He told us to come to you since we have some questions about the Grand Line. Can you help us?"

Zeff scowled at the man. "I'm no pirate anymore. It's true, I sailed on the Grand Line once but-"

"Hey!" An orange blur yanked at the man's springy moustache.

"Naruto!" Sakura shouted.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Have you ever heard of a place called the Elemental Nations? Or the Land of Fire? Or the Hidden Leaf Village? Come on, we're from there and you've gotta have heard about them! Ya Know!"

From there, things took a turn for the strange. Patty climbed out of the sea, to begin yelling at his boss for the kick. Sakura, for once, didn't berate Naruto and grew silent. Waiting for an answer. While

Sasuke had removed his shirt to wring out sea water from it, causing Sakura to grow hearts in her eyes at the view of him shirtless.

While Zeff and Kakashi traded some long, curious looks. Searching deeply, piercingly. Until three hungry stomachs interrupted them. The Genin were each blushing, but that sealed the deal for Zeff.

"Hhhh. Kids must be hungry if three stomachs whine that loudly. Come on in and grab a table."

"But chef! They said they don't have any money to pay with! It's da customer policy. No money, no service." Patty complained.

"Shut it, Patty. I've told ya before, if anyone comes here hungry, we will feed them no matter what. Set up a table for 'em, and get back to work!" The last order, plus a solid kick to his head, had Patty scrambling inside.

"Yes, Chef!" Behind him, the Ninjas gawked in surprise, while Zeff shrugged it off, striding back inside his restaurant.

"AAAHHHHH! YOU'RE Leg!" Naruto cried in terror.

"You-you-you-you-you only have one leg! What happened! They're making you work here despite being crippled!? That's terrible! I've gotta teach the boss here a lesson!"

Rolling up his sleeves, the boy strode forward to the doors.

Until a wooden leg landed on his head, sharply.

"Didn't anyone teach you some manners, little brat!? My leg has been like this for years! I own this restaurant and run it just fine with my peg leg. Shut it and get to a table to eat!"

Several minutes later, Team 7 was enjoying several platters of delicious food. The Genin dug in with gusto, while Kakashi ate more measuredly, before stepping away to the kitchen.

"So," a voice called to his left. Turning, the Jonin found Zeff waiting for him. "Why do ya want to know anything about the Grand Line?"

The Jonin paused. Rehearsing the story he had made in his head, over the past few days.

"Well. A week ago, we met a Devil-Fruit user on our home Island called the Elemental Nations. Something happened, and he launched us to the East Blue. We landed on Tarm's Island and are looking for a way to get back home. However, our home has some, isolationist policies. Nobody has ventured out from the Elemental Nations for over a century. We're pretty lost and are looking to head to the Grand Line to sail back there."

"Tarm mentioned that you travelled to the Grand Line before. And were one of the few to come out of that sea alive. Can you tell us what we're getting into along the way, and what we'll need to prepare to sail there?"

Zeff fixed the Jonin with a hard stare. Testing. Deliberating.

"You honestly expected us to believe that! Those devil-fruit stories are bound to be a-"

"Shut it, Carne." Zeff silenced the cook. "I've heard stories more outlandish than that one. Heck, I might even know who sent them here. And if it's the right person, then they're lucky to even be alive."

"So, do you have any names to go by? You and the kids." He asked Kakashi.

"Hmmm. I'm Hatake Kakashi. The girl is named Haruno Sakura. While the boy with dark hair is called Uchiha Sasuke. I have a feeling the other boy would rather introduce himself." He replied.

Zeff frowned at the cryptic response. But shrugged it off and returned to his kitchen.

"Follow me, Kakashi. We'll talk in my office while the kids fill their stomachs. Sanji!"

"Yeah! What is it, geezer!" A blonde suave man replied. "Take care of the kids at table 16 in the dining room." Zeff barked, while Kakashi looked over the man, stasautéing a pan filled with vegetables, set it down then continued twisting knobs and moving small pots about, without either eye on his workstation.

"All of 'em are hungry, you dare let anything pull attention away an' I'll be kickin' you outa here myself. And don't go charging 'em for their meal either. Got it, brat!"

Sanji didn't respond, only stare right back at the head chef. Something passed between them, and then Zeff stomped off towards a staircase.

Following him, Kakashi was soon in a spacious bedroom where Zeff was lounging on a bed and got straight to the point. "All right. First off, Kakashi. Start by tellin' me just who the heck you are. Never see clothes like those you're carrying, and I know a fighter when I see one."

Kakashi's shock began to rise. "Well, you're right, I am something of a fighter. A ninja from the Elemental Nations, if that means anything."

"Ninjas!" Zeff shouted, with glee. "Really! Can you do some of those crazy tricks?"

The man dropped to his knees, his body trembling excitedly.

Kakashi was baffled. 'His smile is almost bigger than Naruto's.'

"Ummmm....Wait! You've heard about Ninjas? Shinobi?"

Zeff shook his head, then stood tall. Trying to regain some dignity after his childish slip-up.

"Heh. Only in passing. Most of them come from the country of Wano, and a few other places. Samurai come from there as well, some stories about these ninjas talk of them disappearing, creating copies of 'emselves, throwing sharp spinning stars, or other things. Care to give a demonstration?"

Now, Kakashi remained passive, while his excitement was mounting. 'Those sound like chakra skills! If Zeff recognizes some, then maybe Shinobi from our world have come here before!'

"Maybe," the Jonin crinkled his eye, "One rule we have are that a Ninja should never reveal their skills unless absolutely necessary. If a fight were to happen here, maybe you'll get the chance" the cool Hatake replied. Zeff was scowling again, and fixed the ninja with searching eyes. "Fair enough," he gruffly answered. The man began to study Kakashi, while the Jonin gave nothing away.

"Just charting one ship to travel to the Grand Line is a deal no one in this Ocean would accept. You'll likely need to buy a ship to sail there, but unless you've got some strange powers yourself or you've been there for years, you'll need a bigger boat than some four-person skiff the size of my closet. Signing up with the Marines if you just want to head somewhere wouldn't work either, as it takes decades to get enough authority to go cruising around anywhere you wanna go."

"Finding someone willing to go to the Grand Line is gonna be tough. But, you ended up in a decent place to do it. People come through my restaurant on their way to enter the Grand Line often enough. If you stick around long enough, you'll probably find someone willing to take on some extra crew before heading there, or to Logue Town."

Zeff stopped for a moment, giving Kakashi time to ponder. The Jonin poured over Zeff's suggestions.

'All of this is reasonable enough. Still, if we join an international military force or a regular pirate crew, they might not let us leave after learning about our ninja arts. Plus, none of us would want to

join a crew compiled of anyone like those who we defeated in Tarm's village. Still...'

Kakashi eyed the former pirate across from him, carefully. 'This Zeff was once a pirate here as well. So maybe we can find a more agreeable pirate crew.'

"I can't promise anything though," the chef interrupted his thoughts.

"There are some different options. Another one of them would be to head towards Loguetown. It's a city near Reverse Mountain, where people enter the Grand Line. The last stop for anyone heading there, and you could certainly find a crew to join up with. But, if you want to get back home to the Grand Line, your gonna need money to do it."

"Whether to buy fresh supplies, weapons or other gear for the trip. Or staying in a hotel in Loguetown until you find someone willing to take you. If you can't even pay for a meal here, then you're gonna find a lot of problems if you head anywhere else."

Zeff eyed Kakashi carefully. "I'm not a man to turn away some extra hands, so long as they're dedicated and don't need hand holding. The lot of you could work here and save up enough money then sail, if you're willing to. Room and board are free, we accept anyone coming, no matter who or what they are, and-" Zeff raised his knee, and stomped his peg leg to the floor. "Under my roof, you follow my instructions, my rules, my word. What do ya say?"

Kakashi's eye narrowed, his posture utterly nonchalant. 'That certainly is a generous offer.'

"Zeff? I'm surprised you want to just hire us right off the bat. You don't look desperate for extra hands, so why do you want us to work here?"

The man shrugged. "Why would I not? One, you're ninjas. All boys like ninjas, so the chance to work with one is not something I'll pass up.[1] Neither would the rest of my cooks. Next, I guess you could

say I have a heart of gold. Tarm is one of the few people I call a friend, aid him and you get one favour outa me. Third, should your home be as isolated as you claim, you probably don't know much of the East Blue, or a huge part of the Grand Line. That Sea is a deadly battleground. If you just go dragging three teenage kids into there unprepared, the lota you will get dead along the way. I'd rather not see some young promise snuffed out before it gets a chance to live."

Kakashi nodded, smiling through his eye and raising an open hand towards him.

"Ahhh. Well, thank you for your generosity. You do make some good points about how we'd rather find a ship to take us with no strings attached. So, what kind of jobs do you have in mind?" Kakashi resigned himself.

'Naruto and Sasuke not going to take this well. Back to D-rank jobs.'

"Hmmm," a gruff tone was colouring Zeff's voice, he was all business now. "I'll hire you as chore boys, and the girl can be a hostess. Plus, you can save some extra money off any wages or tips that come in. But none of you better start causing trouble or problems while you're at it! Plus, I want you to understand, this is no ordinary restaurant."

Zeff's voice grew low, heavy, more solemn than a funeral. "I built this restaurant for one thing. It doesn't really matter who someone is, or where they come from. If they come in here hungry, then we'll feed them 'till they're stuffed. Do I make myself clear? Can you handle that rule!"

Kakashi cocked his head, curious. But not enough to press the matter. "Doesn't sound like a problem at all."

Stepping forward, the chef offered Kakashi his hand. Which the Jonin casually shook.

"Welcome to my ship."

A week passed with Team 7 working at the Baratie. With a series of disappointments for everybody. None of the Genin were eager to become chore boys or a hostess, reminded of the boring D-rank missions from back in Konoha. Yet Kakashi's more authoritative stance as a Sensei kept their complaints to a minimum, and everyone still did their jobs. There was some excitement among their co-workers, to finally work with a woman. But they were promptly dejected to learn that Sakura was only 12 years old. Some even made the mistake of muttering about a flat-chest shrimp in front of her. Sakura's response was the chuck a plate at their heads, leading to broken dishes and an angry Zeff. But, holding to his rules, the man refused to hit her at all.

Still, on their first morning at the restaurant, Sakura got into an argument with Zeff.

"Whadda mean I can't learn how to cook!? Are you sexist against girls!?"

The pinkette accused the traditional man.

"Cha! That is so unfair! Girls can cook even better than guys! If we learn how to, then Sasuke would love our food so much, he'll definitely ask us out for a date! CHAA!" her Inner-persona cried out.

"I told you!" Zeff grumbled back, with sweat trickling down his brow. "I won't let a girl learn to cook in my kitchen. It's out of respect, not bias."

"Sakura-chan, quiet down," somebody called over. "The head chef has spoken, and you need to follow that. Only the sous chef can question his orders." Sanji was cleaning pots and cooking tools by a sink, with Naruto beside him. Zeff, in a rare moment, nodded in approval.[2] "Hm. Looks like you're finally learning something, eggplant And for you, Sakura," the man round back on the girl. "I don't hire female chefs for a reason. How many times in a day do you see me kick some in here?"

Thinking back on it, the girl blinked in fear. "Ummmm. At least once an hour."

"Hm. So you are watching. Sounds about right, and that is my point."

A long wooden leg stomped against the floor, and all the staff in sight froze at their tasks, wincing.

"I teach people things through violence," Zeff continued. "I can't do that with a girl or a woman. A Man mustn't ever kick a woman. Not in any way, form nor shape. That's common sense, from back when dinosaurs were still around! To any man, we carry the honour of manhood! To protect and respect the honour and dignity of a woman, any woman. Not my staff, and not me."

That closed the matter, with Zeff folding his arms. "If you wanna learn, Sakura. I am sorry. That'll have to be from somebody who isn't me. You're a welcome addition to my restaurant, but in no way do I have the capacities to teach without the use of my kicks." Done, Zeff then turned about, walking off to his kitchen. Leaving Sakura perplexed, and Naruto inspired.

Still, this admiration did not last forever.

"Come on! I thought we came here for adventures. Not more lame chores!" Naruto complained.

"Well, you did steal most of the food, Naruto. So, it's only fair for you to work hard and pay it back," Kakashi reasoned. The Jonin was lounging in a corner, reading his precious copy of Icha-icha Tactics.

"Well if that's the reason, why aren't you working too sensei? It's really unfair for Chef Zeff to give you a break, just because you loaned him one of those pervy books!"

Kakashi grinned at the memory.

"He is the head chef. And why mope around so much? Your clones have been a giant hit here at the restaurant, haven't they?"

"Definitely!" Patty shouted with glee. "Naruto here is a dream come true!" the man praised, ruffling the boy's hair.

"All those clones cut down on the clean-up we have at night to a fraction! You really are one amazing kid, kid!"

"For once, you're right about something thing Patty," a certain Sous chef replied. "But..."

BAMM!

The wall near Kakashi's head shook. With a long, Black leg stuck in the space where the Jonin's head had been. Kakashi had dodged the kick, without losing his place in the book.

"This is a kitchen for working, one way or another. Start with the dishes, or get outa here, Kakashi!"

The Jonin sighed, but nonetheless took the cue. His time at work was largely over for the day, so he just wanted a quiet spot to read. Moving into the restaurant, he found Sakura pouring over books and finances, while Sasuke was cleaning the ceiling.

Seeing the Ninjas using various chakra techniques certainly impressed many of the cooks. Aside from Naruto's Shadow clones, Zeff was ecstatic to have a convenient way to clean his ceilings, and someone with Sakura's book smarts. While he wouldn't let her anywhere near the kitchen, Sakura was pulling weight as a maître d', putting her classroom skills to work balancing the books, or managing orders for food and new furniture.

Sasuke was less thrilled at the odds jobs than Naruto, but the repetitive tasks were creating odd reactions in the boy. They gave him time to actually think, clearly, about Itachi, Kakashi, and his teammates, for once. Looking back on how heavily he trained to

awaken his Sharingan in the past, while always pushing other people away. Until protecting someone else proved to be the trigger to awaken his eyes.

Kakashi himself had lighter workloads in the evenings but was still very popular with Zeff. During their first days, the Jonin had an altercation with some difficult customers. A husband and wife refusing to leave and demanding their meal should be free. Zeff was at a loss over how to deal with a particularly entitled and difficult lady, while Kakashi quickly immobilized them without any problems or injuries. What really left Zeff impressed, was how Kakashi did it without harming a woman, breaking furniture or wasting any food.

After seeing his more delicate approach, the head chef assigned him to act as a bouncer, keeping things quiet without any broken dishes or smashed furniture.

Which had already saved the Baratie hundreds of thousands of bellies.

Glancing at his Genin hard at work, Kakashi smiled. 'This kind of work really has been good for them. Something to focus on past their various personal troubles has lightened their moods, somewhat. Plus, these two seem to have taken my words about Naruto and Itachi to heart. Sakura hasn't done more than yell at him since our talk in the forest, but she still avoids him more and approaches Sasuke only sparingly. While Sasuke did apologize, and that was a milestone. Yet he spends every moment away from work quiet and contemplating.'

'Maybe some fresh training exercises will help them.'

"Hey, Kakashi," Zeff called out to the Jonin.

"I just realized. I never did compliment you a few days back. Taking care of that difficult woman who was a customer. You knew my policy about women, but managed to remove her without causing harm."

Zeff nodded, while the rest of the staff became a gawking audience, with some ideas of their own.

"Hey, maybe you should take some pointers from him, boss!" Patty cried from across the room.

"Yeah, all of us want to work with a woman. Especially a curvy, beautiful one with a body to die for." Carne chimed in. Before a wistful look crossed his face.

"A real woman. Getting all sweaty in the kitchen, letting an apron hug her curves and assets. Or bending down low to give us a nice view of -"

"Carne! Get your head Outa the gutter, and get back to work!"

Zeff promptly dealt with his perverted employee. Unfortunately, Naruto had overheard. He came bursting through the doors, waving his arms and grinning. "Oh, you want to see a woman! I can help with that! HEY EVERYONE!"

Kakashi and Sasuke soon felt a sinking feeling. While Sakura was mortified.

'He Wouldn't!' 'I just cleaned the floors!'

"Naruto don't you dare-" But he already had an audience, and fingers between both hands folded together.

"Sexy Jutsu!"

In a flash, there 'she' was. A Tall, beautiful, deliciously sexy girl stood in the restaurant. Well-endowed, perhaps 16, 'she' was showing off a lot of skin, with wispy clouds covering her chest, hips and derrière, one hand was planted on her hip, the other raised behind her head, showing off some perky, nude boobies, long sexy legs, and an irresistible pout.

Each of the cooks froze. Their eyes drank in every angle of the naked figure; from her alluring bust, to a tight, sexy tush, toned and limbed legs, and what they could see of an hourglass figure.

"Ghhaaaa!" "HOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!" "WHOA!"

"NAKED! NAKED! NAKED LADY!"

The last shouts called everyone in the restaurant down for a look. Zeff himself was powerless to stop it, with a steady drip of blood slipping out his nose at the sight. Sakura came stomping forwards, yet a single arm caught her shoulder so tight she couldn't move. An arm which belonged to Kakashi, who was giggling perversely at the view.

Geysers of blood came erupting from the spectators, and Sanji was doing pirouettes and waxing poetry over the spectacle. "Oh, well, I do feel my stomach empty," the illusionary girl whispered. "Would you please cook up a lot of Ramen for me?"

"None shant stop me, my princess," Sanji sang. "And what shall I call thee? Then how might the lowly form of life that I am, worship your sexiness-I mean gracefulness?"

"Oooo, you, can call me. Naruko," 'she' answered. "NARUKO!" "NARUKO!" "NARUKO!" Nearly everyone in the dining room was chanting, while Sasuke was making a new face every fresh moment, and Sakura was steaming between embarrassment, incredulity and disgust

Still... eventually... Naruto had to undo that jutsu, and there was hell to pay. Zeff was furious, and 1/3 of his staff were blacked out. But the few still awake had formed a human wall between him and Naruto, wanting to keep his pervy ninjutsu around; with Carne and Patty at the front.

"Ghhhh! You brat!" Zeff complained. "Fine. If you wanna act like rowdy teenagers in heat, then take it outside so my dining room

doesn't end up covered with blood. But not tonight! Naruto's gonna clean all of this up, and disinfect every millimetre of my dining room first!" Stomping a foot in a pool of blood, one of several dotting the floors.

While Naruto pouted, muttering about pervy, old men. Kakashi noticed Sakura and Sasuke still glaring at their teammate.

'The last time I left things alone with them, it... didn't turn out very well. They probably need a distraction.' The Jonin-sensei contemplated.

"Hey, Sakura, Sasuke."

"Yes, sensei?" "What?" they replied.

"Well, I just had a small thought. While Naruto's busying cleaning here, Why don't we go to the other side of the ship and do some new training?

"WHAAATT! Cool, sensei! Let's go!" Naruto cried, barrelling to the door; and was promptly cut off by Zeff.

"You ignorant, punk!" the chef snatched him off his feet, holding the boy up by his shirt. "You're not going anywhere until my dining room is spotless. You wanna do that 'sexy'-disgrace again, take that show outside and wash it all away. Your teammates worked hard today, and they never pulled a stunt of this kind! No ninja training for you tonight!" Zeff declared. Naruto tried complaining, but- his vision exploded from a solid wood pole landing on his head. Then a second-third-fourth-at the fifth, somebody stopped Zeff's leg by grasping it high in the air. "Enough." With a chill, the head chef met Kakashi's eyes, while Naruto was on his backside with multiple welts swelling upon his head. "Nobody," Kakashi hissed, invoking a chill down Zeff's spine, "strikes, my, precious Genin. Chef, your point aside, should Naruto become unconscious, how might he tidy up in here? Is that clear?" Glaring back, Zeff, nevertheless, did not answer, only withdrawing his peg leg and stomping away, while

Kakashi himself glared at Naruto, then motioned towards a mop, and the boy pulled himself to his feet, grumbling. "Hurry everyone!" Patty exclaimed. "Sooner the dining space gets spotless, the sooner we get more Naruko!" Everyone joined in at that, with Sanji at the lead.

While Kakashi and his other two students slipped out the door. "Alright," the Jonin spoke. "Now, do either of you recall our, conversations, about comrades or about Naruto?" Pouting, or in Sakura's case wearing a highly constipated look on her face, she and Sasuke each nodded.

"Well," Kakashi cracked a smile with his eye, "I want neither of you bothering Naruto over his... popular hobby. Alright? But, since he chose to indulge it, that leaves him missing out on learning new ninja skills, right now. A very essential one the pair of you can start cultivating, right now. How to walk on water."

End.

[1]-One Piece, Chapter Manga chapter 817, episode 769. Even the serious Trafalgar Law and Zoro were eager to meet a real ninja, and amazed at Raizo's skills. It's an inescapable fact, Ninjas are cool.

[2]-Sakura is 12 years old here, just on the cusp of puberty. She is way too young for Sanji to bother flirting with.

What the Heck do you know?

Chapter 5:

What the Heck do you know? Chivalry and Training.

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Team 7 had been at the Baratie for 3 weeks now, and things were running very smoothly. Each of them were making some decent money from the restaurant, plus a few bonuses for their, special skills. Zeff himself hadn't needed to replace any tables or chairs, thanks to his dining room being far quieter under Kakashi's watchful eye. While Naruto and Sasuke had reluctantly proven to be good workers, and Sakura was vastly appreciated by the guests and staff. Although Zeff still refused to teach her how to cook.

Evan Kakashi found a small measure of normalcy. His job as the bouncer only required a sharp eye and otherwise involved staying out of the way of other people. He also spent time talking with Zeff about the East Blue, learning of the World Government, the man called Gol D. Roger, and more events that sounds to be more fact than fictionized. 'Somebody creating Earthquakes, Sea monsters large enough to swallow Islands, and legally sanctioned slavery?' Kakashi was laying back in his bunk, mulling over things so alien to him. 'All without chakra, and half of those claims are only legends, at most. It hardly sounds real, and Zeff himself mentioned half of

anything drawn from here-say is from anyone who hasn't seen it for themselves to pass along accurate facts.'

One night, the four ninjas even learned about a Logbook kept by Zeff.

"So, you really wrote about everything, including ordinary and boring stuff, in this book?"

"Little brat," Zeff answered in an endearing tone, "aboard my ship, not one day goes by that can be called a 'boring' one. That's true here and it was true with my pirate crew. This book," Zeff caressed the cover with one hand, "is a detailed record of my one-year journey to the Grand Line. It's a treasure I hold deeper in my heart than anything on this earth. The only record of my crew that remains, that says we all lived and surmounted so much, together, until each of them were lost in a storm. Some of the best days of my life are in these pages. I read it, sometimes, to bring back old memories."

Kakashi grew curious at the older man's wishful words, while Sasuke had a peculiar look at it, contemplative. "Have you ever thought about going back? What made you decide to leave those days behind and open a restaurant here? You're still powerful and strong, even without your leg."

A sad look came to the man's serious eyes. His face grew hard, rigid, even cold.

"Because I lost the one thing, I cared for the most on this earth. My crew were my family. They were everything to me. And I'm the only one out of us still alive."

Sasuke had to suppress a shudder, pressing his lips tight and forcing his eyes forward. Silently, a hand came to one shoulder, while somebody else made a small gasp. Zeff ignored it, yet Sakura was stealing glances at Sasuke and held her hands together at her chin, tentative.

"There's nothing to compel me to return to those seas," Zeff continued. "My restaurant here is more than all I need or want outa life. And it's got nothing to do with my missing leg at all."

"Heck, I've only brought this up, should any of you desire to read it. And you might consider beginning one of your own. A crew logbook, keeping a record of the different days, encounters and more that you find on your way back to your home."

"Why'd we do that?" Naruto questioned. "The past already happened, and if you saw it, why look back on it? Especially over any bad stuff?"

"Plenty of reason, Bratt," Zeff stood up, but didn't set his book down. "Sometimes a way to look back on your decisions can lend answers to where you're going. Plus, the best to prevent the same mistakes from repeating themselves, is to record them. Me." His eyes travelled down to Naruto, then knelt to ensure the boy could meet his eyes. "I use this to look back on my life, ensuring those I met never wind up forgotten, and enjoy a peaceful respite when things get overwhelming. No matter what somebody does, it ain't no one's place to judge them. You understand?"

Naruto thought that over, then even turned his eyes to a corner and nodded back. Those answers gave Kakashi an idea, too. 'A record of our exploits, experiences and events, right here as they happen,' Kakashi thought over. 'It couldn't hurt. And would serve as a mission report if we do return to the village after some months.'

"Well then," the Jonin spoke up. "DO, each of you wish to keep one of your own? Or a single volume that only a few of us record?"

"I like it too, sensei," Sakura volunteered. Sasuke shrugged it away and strode off, while Naruto suddenly got enthusiastic about a voyage journal, too; not to Kakashi's surprise as his two Genin started speaking about how they met the Genie and got to the Baratie.

In the end, those details, but only in broad strokes not intricate details, wound up in a logbook Sakura claimed to be in charge of.

The pinkette had also begun to slowly grow some sense of professionalism at the restaurant. Through some positive and negative experiences there. One particular event left its impact on each of the shinobi, and some closer bonds with Zeff and Sanji.

"Hello there. Welcome to the Baratie, the finest sea restaurant in all the Blues," Sakura spoke to fresh customers, menus in her hands and her memory sharp.

"Your table is at the back of the dining room, if you would follow me..."

As the girl graciously led them through the tables, she heard the doors swing open again.

"Mardy, tables 13 and 20 are free. Use them for the fresh customers," she called to a waiter without missing a beat.

Once her party were seated, the pinkette strode back to the front desk. Passing the stairs before a commotion began.

"Ghhk! What did you make this from!"

Turning her head, she spied a bowl with meatballs and hot broth flying towards her, with the stair railing in between. The projectile struck the railing, breaking to pieces and sherds^[1] scattered everywhere. "Owe!" two jagged pieces cut her, one across her forehead, the other her cheek, leaving long, shallow cuts.

"I'm paying for good food here!" somebody complained. "Not to eat meatballs made of tuna guts!" A fat man, wearing a pompous baby-blue suit and filthy napkin was the source of trouble.

"I demand better food! And having my meal free of-"

"Sakura-chan!" Naruto burst from the kitchen. Hearing Sakura's shout, the Genin noticed his teammate whipping blood from her forehead. In a heartbeat, he was beside her, trying to help the girl.

Kakashi was there just as quickly. Once he saw it was a small cut, he turned towards the culprit. But...

"What. Have. You. Done?" In a chilling whisper, Sanji set aside one order, slowly, with a shadow over his eyes.

"Ah! Someone decent that I can complain to. hear me, now this is-"

"What. Have. You. Done?" Sanji stalked forward. "What. Have. You. Done?"

Sanji's stood before the culprit, unveiling a murderous glare from beneath his hair. The cook seized the fop by the face, hoisting him off his feet with one arm.

"It took me 2 whole days of preparation to make that dish. Do you see anybody else displeased with my cooking? Now, that good food, it has sherds of tableware scattered in it. It's become dangerous to eat."

"But even worse," snarling, Sanji resembled a ferocious tiger. "That girl, Sakura-chan, has given this restaurant nothing but hard work and good decisions. Now, that young lady is hurt, especially one so sweet, kind, and dedicated. Her injuries were caused by you!"

His leg snapped up, and what followed, was a beat-down the devil would blush to watch.

"WHAT-KIND-OF-MONSTER-!" with every word a kick accompanied it. "HURTS-A-YOUNG-LADY!"

"Sanji!" Patty's voice rang through the dining room. "That's too far! This time-"

"Look at Sakura!"

"Huh?" the burly cook gawked, then eyes caught the girl, with tears swelling around blood streaking down her face.

Patty went silent, as did more staff walking out.

"That bastard threw his food away!" Naruto yelled, "It's bowl broke and the pieces cut into Sakura. It's all his fault."

"Why'd you hoggin' him, Sanji!" Patty charged, with one fist cocked back. He sunk it dead-center in the offender's chest, knocking all the wind out of him.

All the patrons watched, petrified or smirking at the unsavory man's comeuppance. Even Sasuke had come in to see the commotion.

"COOKS!" Zeff's roar echoed through the dining room. "You all outa know better. What's this filthy stain doing in my restaurant!?"

"We aren't done with him, yet, Geezer," Sanji hissed. "Yeah, this bum's owed a beatin' chef." Patty agreed. "Where's your care for Sakura, kneeling there in pain?" Zeff barked back, glaring at them, both cooks withered, guiltily. They noticed Kakashi was hustling Sakura upstairs, and the Jonin met Zeff's eyes, with the latter nodding to him. "You boys and I'll speak later," he ordered Sanji and Patty. "For now, tenderize that imbecile so I can fillet him properly!"

5 minutes later, the patron was flying out of the restaurant, with nearly every bone in his body, broken.

Sanji and Zeff nodded at their handiwork and subtly dusting their feet off. The former took out a cigarette, lit a fresh smoke, and walking back inside he found a boy kneeling at his feet.

"That... was... so... cool!" Naruto's head rose, his eyes sparkling like priceless sapphires, filled with awe and admiration.

"Please! Teach me how to do that! How to beat up other guys that hurt Sakura-chan. I wanna be great and strong like you, believe it!"

"Hm," Sanji replied, his curly eyebrow twitching. "You wanna learn how to fight, and protect a lady? Sure, I'll teach you-"

"Hey, little punk!" Zeff called over them.

"What, geezer!"

"What do you think you're doing, offering to teach a brat!? I'm the chef around here, 'less you forget. You get back into the kitchen, and don't go tutoring anyone, anything. That'll only happen under my approval. You hear me?"

Glaring in return, Sanji nodded then strode off for the staircase. Zeff was behind him. Both found Kakashi kneeling down beside Sakura, dabbling gauze over the cuts while a second Naruto stood beside him, handing out bandages and cleaning up the blood. The Cheff stomped over and gently tapped Sakura's chin to get a closer look. "Awww, that must sting, poor girl. I'm sorry. And smart on you both," Zeff complemented Kakashi and the clone. "An open wound like this in a kitchen, just a drop on one table would cost us a whole day's worth of meals."

"Girl, you take this day off, and keep those cuts clean. Brat," Zeff looked over at the Naruto beside him. "You wanna learn Black leg style? Be ready tonight, and you can be learning from eggplant and me."

"Really?" Naruto, the both of them, exclaimed. "Hh. You think I'd joke around about fighting?" With that promise, the real Naruto seize Zeff in a hug. It took a bit to unravel the boy, but Sakura's head wound was still bleeding, hence Sanji volunteered to guide her upstairs. While that happened, however, Zeff's iron grip seized Kakash by his collar, dragging the Jonin upstairs to the chef's office.

"Alright. Listen up, you lazy brat." Turning to meet his eyes, Kakashi grew tense at the aggression Zeff had towards him.

"Whadoya think you're doing with these kids? I thought I told you how dangerous the Grand Line was. Did you even listen to me?"

"Umm. Yes," Kakashi cocked his head, confused. "You mentioned how chaotic things could be, but I'm sure some additional training we've done will-"

With a crash, Zeff's wooden stump drove into the wall near the Jonin's head. "What training?!" Off-guard, and with splinters of wood flying, Kakashi made the mistake of closing his single right eye, and felt a solid blow land near his ear.

"You've been doing squat!" Zeff barked. "You honestly think you're ready for that sea!? For those kids to survive it!?" Another kick came, this one for the Ninja's arm. Then and another, another, another... after several minutes, Zeff was left panting. While Kakashi's face was slightly bruised, after dodging most of Zeff's kicks but still hit a few.

"You-hhhh... hhhh....-damn it, I'm getting old," bending over his tired knees, Zeff nevertheless still had a burning glare fixed on Kaakshi. "You-really think those-he... hhhh....those kids are ready for the Grand Line!?... hhhhh... hhhh."

After a few moments to catch his breath, the Head-chef stood tall, chastising the lazy Jonin.

"The chaos of that sea always dwarfs any war elsewhere. You may have been safe where you used to be, but that's changed, completely, you cyclops brat. Should you head to the Grand Line tomorrow, with those kids with you, the four would end up dead in under a week."

"Were it up to me, none of those kids would set foot on that sea until they were 18, at least! But I can tell asking you and them to wait until that long to reach home would only drum up too much indigestion. You want them to keep alive, you need to prepare them for the dangers coming up to face them."

Kakashi groaned at the lecture.

"I agree, your stories certainly mean the Grand Line is a dangerous place." He tried placating the chef. "But they shouldn't be any worse than what the Great Ninja Wars, or the Chunin Exams in our home could grow to. My Genin will be able to handle it." His voice held casual confidence. Before getting, displaced, a mission we did a short time before went badly. But Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke didn't break. Plus, they learn quickly. Should they be heading there alone, then I'd have my doubts. But that's not the case. I am here, and won't let any of them die, plus they can still grow along the way. So we will be prepared."

Zeff hesitated at that proclamation. A slight, deadly glint in Kakashi's eyes sent a message to the chef. Still, the man wasn't going to let things be. "Really?" Sitting back, Zeff did not change his gaze towards Kakashi. "Is that what happened to all of your old friends who died on your watch?"

The Jonin froze.....his blood turning cold at the accusation. Growing into an icy blue haze, even spilling chakra-laced killing intent towards Zeff.

The chef didn't buckle, he wasn't even bothered by the presence. "I can tell you blame yourself for their deaths, Kakashi," the chef spoke. "Whoever they were. I don't know what happened, and I'm not asking to know."

"But if you take those kids to the Grand Line as they are now. Without any real fighting skills or the power to stand on their own. Then you'll only kill yourself trying to keep 'em alive, and leave 'em leaderless to make it back to their home."

"They need to prepare for what's waiting on that sea. Especially after neglecting to teach Naruto anything!"

Another kick came, this one to the floor, though, not at Kakashi.

"You've been working that water walking power with them for weeks,

but never thought to do that same with Naruto! What kind of teacher ignores their own students that blatantly!?"

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. "Well, the cooks have been crowding Naruto, every night, to see his sexy jutsu. Sasuke and Sakura are always embarrassed or angry at it, so instead of fighting the inevitable, I wanted to keep them separated to stop any fights from springing up. Plus, he hasn't asked me for any new skills, so I don't believe he has the motivation to train right now."

"Hmmm." The Chef derogatorily snorted. "That excuse is flimsy, at best, you ask me, brat. Why not leave one of his clones to entertain my cooks, then take the real one aside and work with 'em? And Naruto's a kid. Of course he ain't got much discipline or dedication. And he ain't gonna grow it outa thin air. Those are traits a teacher needs to give him. Even pound it into his head."

"That brat Sanji always wanted to look at women when he was that age, so I had to whack several lessons about priorities into his thick skull! Now you have to do the same, and any excuses will only cause those kids to die."

Kakashi opened his mouth... then closed it. A moment later, he tried again. But the words to refute this case died in his throat. 'Teaching them good habits and discipline? My own teammates and sensei already had that when we came together, and back then I prided myself on being more dedicated and focused than anyone else. Might Guy, Asuma, Hayate, Yugao, all of them had good training, else they wouldn't have graduated from the academy, or passed the real Genin test. But... Naruto or Sakura. Lord Third spoke of how Sasuke is already studious. But I just assumed that-"

"Bring Sasuke-brat and Sakura out tonight when I start training Naruto." Zeff cut into his musings. "I ain't doing your job for you, brat. And there are a few things you all can learn that would defiantly benefit anybody."

The chef planted his stump on Kakashi's chest.

"Got it, you grey-hound, punk?"

Kakashi was quiet for some minutes. Then gave an answer.

4 hours later, the restaurant was spotless; all from Naruto's enthusiasm to start learning. Zeff made good on his promise, raising the fins around his establishment to start teaching the boy.

Sanji was present as well, and Kakashi brought Sasuke and Sakura along, as promised. And Zeff started speaking, with his arms folded and looking straight for Naruto. "So. You wanna learn how to fight like Sanji can, brat?"

"Ya-Ya-Ya. I really do. He's so cool!" Zeff grinned. 'Kid's got enthusiasm. It's a start. And he'll need some decent fighting skills for the Grand Line."

"Well then. Pay attention to me, and so should Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi," the chef glanced at the other Ninjas. "Listen-up. I've been watching all of you for a while. Including how you ninjas use those strange powers, and the training Sasuke and Sakura have been doing at night. You guys all have one commonality that is crucial to your skills, and something that you always put at risk." Each of them turned their eyes at Zeff, however-

"WHAT! What Training!?" Naruto cried out in betrayal.

"Be quiet, brat." Zeff scolded him, joined with a light tap with his peg leg, on Naruto's crown.

"While you've been fooling around turning into a naked girl every night, your sensei was teaching the other two some new skills."

"Naruto." Kakashi spoke-up. "I'm the one to blame," he confessed, "for not telling you. Sasuke and Sakura were very, perturbed by, how popular your sexy-jutsu is with the cooks. So I decided to keep you each separate and prevent any hostile incidents like the ones in

Hamna Village. But, it was unfair to leave you out of this training; so I will begin to teach you the same skills they were developing tomorrow. Alright?"

Naruto gapped at his teacher. It was one... of the rare... rare occasion when someone else gave any kind of apology to him in his life. While Sasuke and Sakura glanced down, slightly admonished at the memories of their talks with Kakashi weeks ago.

"O-Okay, sensei," Naruto mumbled. "Yeah, let's get started right now. No place worrying about something, not nothing, ya know!" the blonde replied.

"Now then," Zeff took back control of the session. "As I was saying. Each of you got some impressive skills and powers. Heck, maybe even more than what I've seen since there ain't been a real fight here at all since you arrived. But, from Naruto's shadow clones, to how each time you walk on the ceiling, all of you have to use your hands to make different shapes and put those powers to use, correct?"

"That's right," Sakura answered. Followed by a textbook explanation about chakra and ninjutsu. Which Zeff patiently waited through, since Sakura was a girl.

"Next time just jump to the hand-signs part, Sakura. All the extra crap was irrelevant here. Anyways," Zeff continued, unfolding his arms. "I get the gist that you depend on these hand-signs to use these 'jitsu' you talked about."

"Jutsu, Chef Zeff."

"The point is, you depend on your hands to use them," Zeff drew his own limbs to eye level. "But, if your hands were cut. If they get damaged, or worse, you lost a hand entirely, then all of your skills would be lost with them. Tell me. Can you use any of those powers with just a single hand?"

Three of the Leaf Shinobi shuffled, uncomfortably. While Naruto was scrunching his face, thinking about using certain jutsu and how two hands could be used.

"Hm. Yes, we can," Sasuke spoke up. Calling everyone's attention to him.

"It would be very difficult, to put it mildly. But some ninjas can weave hand-signs using only one hand. One adversary we encountered before, Haku, was able to do it. Still, you make a decent point. So what-"

"WHAAATTT! Haku Could Make Hand-signs With Just One Hand!?" A certain blonde, inattentive loudmouth cried in shock.

Sakura and Sasuke blinked, while Kakashi was more reasonable.

"Hhhh. That's right. We didn't tell you, did we Naruto?" The Jonin replied, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment. "Well Haku really-"

"Enough!" Zeff proclaimed. "You're moving this lesson off-topic, brat. My point, your hands are important to use these powers that you've got. But, if any of you throw a punch or use hands to fight anyone, you put them in danger and risk sacrificing such skills far too recklessly."

"That is why Sanji and I are going to teach you the basics of my own black-leg fighting style."

"Now, you all know that I was called 'Red-foot Zeff,' once upon a time. This nickname had a reason behind it. I would only fight using my feet, and even now I continue to with my peg leg. Under no conditions will I use my hands for anything save my craft as a cook. The name 'Red-foot' came from how hard I would kick someone, staining my boots bright red with the blood of any adversary idiot enough to stand in my way."

The man's serious tone left the Genin stunned. Even Kakashi was impressed, recalling the power behind the man's kicks.

"However, all of that was done for a very specific reason," Zeff continued, raising his hands to the air.

"It was a means to protect these precious hands. I'm a cook. If I ruin my hands, there would be no way for me to do anything in a kitchen. Ruining your hands in battle is the end of one's life as a cook."

Dropping his hands to his pockets, the chef fixed each ninja with a hard stare.

"Is it hard to see how this condition applies to you lot as ninjas? If any of you throw an attack from your hands, you risk losing a finger or your entire hands against a skilled enemy. Even using a blade carries the same kind of danger to you. So, learning my way to fight, the Black-Leg Style, will be more than ideal for you all. Do you agree, Kakashi?"

As everyone turn to the Jonin, the man's eye retained a neutral appearance. He removed his hands from their pockets holding open palms before him and eyeing them both carefully. Then Kakashi moved his gaze to his own feet, shuffling one, then the other. This continued for several moments until Kakashi glanced at his students before facing Zeff with new respect.

"Fundamentally, you make a strong case Chef Zeff. The concept of fighting with solely one's legs would be quite practical. And it presents some new opportunities for training right now. However, there is one shortcoming that is more crippling for Shinobi than cooks."

"You may emphasize protecting your hands," Kakashi elucidated, "but can still move around and be a first-class chef with a missing leg. We do not really have that kind of luxury, and many shinobi careers have been cut short by the loss of a leg.[2] Even Ninjas who have only one hand or a single arm can still use weapons, or

function in separate roles. Should anyone lose their leg, their ninja career has died."

"We favour stealth and mobility more than power. Your technique sounds like it'll leave our legs a little too exposed to be completely transferable to Ninja-arts."

Zeff's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Hmm. I can see you ain't as lazy or complacent as you seem to be, brat. Valid point, I'll tip my hat to them. But few things in life are ever perfect. Those shortcomings by risking your own legs are always present, but enough training and preparation can limit such risk. Something that holds true for nearly any skill a person learns. No different from a cook burning their hands in the kitchen, or losing a finger. Awareness and experience leave such options, manageable."

Kakashi silently mulled over Zeff's opinions and found he agreed with them.

"Alright. I suppose there's nothing that can be lost from trying to learn these Black-leg-style skills from you. If I could make one request, though. Could Sanji take Naruto and begin to train him personally. While Sakura and Sasuke stay here with us?"

Zeff nodded, while Naruto shouted in unfairness.

"Why, Kakashi-sensei!? Are you giving them special treatment just because of the extra training!? That's really unfair. If you'd told me about it, then I'd have been here even before them and ready to learn, believe it!"

The Jonin sighed, mildly frustrated at the boy's habit of jumping around.

"Naruto, I'm not being completely unfair," he tried mollifying his charge. "I figured I'm the only one who can train with Sakura out of everyone here without being kicked to a pulp by Zeff. Also, you are a little behind in the technical field when it comes to your taijutsu

compared to them. So, training one-on-one with Sanji would go a long way to rectifying that deficiency. Plus," Kakashi took a slight risk, cracking a smile behind his mask. "one-on-one with Sanji. That would make you the centre of one teacher's attention, instead of being mixed in with the others."

Naruto's only answer was a shining grin. The Jonin was certainly learning more about his own students, but still not without faults.

Glancing back to the others, he noticed a frustrated glint in Sasuke's eyes.

'Hhhhhhh. Always stepping on someone's toes.'

"Sakura, Sasuke. While Naruto is off with Sanji. You can train on the water, practising the new skills each of you developed last week while learning this new style of fighting. Does that sound good?"

Once all of the Genin were placated, Zeff and Sanji displayed their skills to the ninjas. From front and side kicks, to twisting hand-stands, heel-strikes and swing-kicks. Even while cartwheeling around to get a different angle to strike from. What followed was a spar between Sanji and Kakashi to show live-combat application. The Genin were amazed, while Kakashi could easily envision using such skills in his own arsenal.

The genius was thinking, hard. 'These techniques could certainly be used in conjunction with hand-signs. Casting genjutsu over an enemy during a series of kicks, or finishing a combination of strikes with ninjutsu attacks. I could even use ninjutsu as an opening move, setting up an opponent for several kicks. Or using certain combinations to manoeuvre foes into ideal positions for a devastating attack.'

Once the demonstration was over, Zeff demanded each of the Ninjas start running laps.

"Run around the edges of the fins at a full sprint for 100 laps, kids. Plus an extra 150 for the sensei. Once I can see how strong your legs are, we'll know where to begin from."

As they began sprinting around the restaurant, Kakashi leapt down to the water to give the Genin extra room. Followed by Sasuke, and another shout from Naruto in disbelief. Sanji stayed on the blonde, driving him to keep running with a few kicks of encouragement. As they continued to sprint, Zeff kept a watchful eye on each of his charges.

Sakura began to slow down after the 15th lap, her basic levels of fitness quickly falling short, while the absence from any dieting gave the girl the energy to last longer than she otherwise would have. Meanwhile, Sasuke lasted for 20 laps, stumbling over the water after the first 10, before he began running low on chakra. From there, the boy leapt back onto the fins and continued to run.

Kakashi kept at a hard pace, as did Naruto. One had a lifetime of intense, dedicated training, while the other's ridiculous stamina and habits of running from Chunin and Jonin on a semi-regular basis were truly paying-off.

Sakura and Sasuke were amazed to see Naruto outperforming them, while the orange Uzumaki revealed in his accomplishment. Until the 50th lap.

"Hey come on, Sasuke!" the boy gloated, dropping into a jog beside the struggling Uchiha. "Can't the class genius keep going? Who's the Loser no-"

"NARUTO!" THWAK-SPLOOSH!

Sanji had knocked the blonde out to the water. Frowning at the boy's choice to slack off.

Once he swam back to the boat, the sous chef began to scold him.

"Don't slack off! Stick to the running, or the geezer will kick you even harder than I can!"

Naruto's complaints died at that threat, before he took off in a rush.

After several minutes, Kakashi finished first, followed by Naruto 30 laps later. The boy stooped over, panting, while Kakashi was simply breathing deeper than usual.

"Good. You've got some good legs and decent stamina Naruto. Now head off with Sanji, while I start Kakashi on the fundamentals, and your fellow ninjas finish their laps."

Sakura nearly stopped in surprise, amazed at Naruto's accomplishment. Before a few words from Kakashi encouraged her to keep running. The girl was still on her 56th lap, pushing hard but moving far slower. While Sasuke was on his 78th, and even more determined to finish.

Sanji called Naruto aside to work with him one-on-one, first stretching out the boy's legs to maintain their flexibility, then teaching him to basics of balance and coordination for the Black-leg techniques. It was a struggle as the boy would try adding his own moves and jumps; anything that looked cool or flashy. Only to meet a stern kick from Sanji to follow his words exactly.

While Kakashi remained with Zeff, going over the same fundamentals. Eventually, Sakura dropped to her knees, nearly exhausted after her 72nd lap, until Naruto's encouragement rang in her ears. Sanji joined in, the pair of blondes driving the girl to run slightly harder, with some determination.

'I... can...t le... let Na..Narut-... uto do... be..etter... tha..an me...'
the tired girl thought with spite, pushing through her screeching muscles.

Meanwhile, Sasuke was still pushing hard, with only 9 laps to go. But felt the strain from such continuous sprinting. Still, the Uchiha didn't

stop, as he had deduced the reasons behind such intense running in a taijutsu style reliant on kicks and leg strength. Eventually, Sasuke finished and joined Kakashi, while Sanji kept Naruto practising simple front kicks and round-houses. His tutor even displayed surprise at how quickly the boy could respond to more tactile learning methods.

Eventually, Sakura was down to her final few laps, while Sasuke was struggling with certain moves. Even Naruto's movements were starting to slow down, feeling fresh muscles he didn't understand could hurt.

"Wh-wh-Why..why are m... hhh....my shoul-..hhh... shoulder sss... so hard? And my tummy... hhhh....it feels tight and hurts." The blonde panted.

"Hmmm. So, your abdominals are underdeveloped," Sanji observed.

"Listen up, Naruto. When somebody uses kicks, they have to twist their entire body to bring speed and power to bear. Your core muscles, the ones in the stomach below your rib-cage, are a crucial part of this fighting-style. They are your source of balance whenever you throw a kick."[2]

"Plus, to raise your legs, you use the lower-core muscles while the middle and upper ones control your balance. Basically, you're doing a half-sit-up each time you raise your leg."[3]

The sous-chef took a smoke from his cigarette before he continued.

"If you don't feel that kind of burn, then it means your kick is sloppy or wrong. Or you lean backwards too far and throw off your own balance. Start doing some leg-raises, then side-crunches to build-up your core. Plus, your shoulders hurt since there are tensing up from the exertions."[3] The teacher instructed.

"Uhhhhhhhhh," Naruto gapped in confusion. "I'd don't really get what you said. But I can do those exercises, sure."

The next moment, the boy dropped to the ground. Followed by sloppy leg raises. Sanji was quick to correct his charge, and soon Naruto's form improved.

Meanwhile, Sasuke was being knocked around and tutored by Zeff himself, while Sakura finished her laps and began to stretch with Kakashi out on the water.

"Sakura, I'm curious. Why didn't you run out on the water at all like Sasuke and I did?" the Jonin asked her.

"Be..because... hhhh... sensei... hh... I don... hhh... don't have... hhhh... as much ch... hhhh... chakra... Doing that... hhh... hhhh....I wouldn't....hhhh.....hhhh....hhh... finished....Or... hhh..would hav... have needed... hhhh... to stop part w-... hhh... part way..." the unfit girl brokenly replied.

The answer took Kakashi by surprise. Before nodding at his student's explanation and decision.

"Good judgement. You recognized a weakness and didn't fall into it. And used your intellect instead of your ego."

By the time Sakura had finished stretching, Sasuke was battered, bruised, and could barely move. So Kakashi stepped forward with the next stage of his training plan.

"Alright. Sakura. Let's start you on learning some of these Black-leg techniques. Sasuke," the Jonin-sensei commanded.

"... I want you to step back and start a new kind of training. Active your eyes and try to keep track of Zeff's techniques. It'll be some good practice for the perception and adaptation methods of your Sharingan."

Zeff blinked, sharply. "His eyes? And what the heck is a 'Sharingan,' Kakashi?"

Belatedly, the Jonin realized he had never informed Zeff of the special eyes carried by him and Sasuke. This was followed by a brief explanation, with some extra reasoning from Kakashi.

"You just finished teaching Sasuke some fundamental skills. My thoughts were for Sakura to begin learning the same ones, while Sasuke traces them with his eyes. He wouldn't be copying the techniques and using them immediately, as that can take a large amount of practice and skill. And it wouldn't be unfair since they are both learning the same skills. Yet, Sasuke can get used to his Sharingan's more passive abilities, and understand the intricacies of these techniques better from observing how Sakura and I execute them."

Zeff frowned at the concept. But after some mental notes not to do anything himself for the Uchiha to possibly cheat from, he accepted the Jonin's explanation.

Sakura began to learn the Black-leg techniques, under Kakashi and Zeff's watchful instruction. With the pinkette driving some additional focus into how precise and accurate she was, out of concern for her crush copying certain mistakes by accident.

At the end of the training sessions, the moon was high in the sky, Kakashi was quite tired, two Genin were slumped over in exhaustion, and Naruto was just sore.

Each of the adults carried them to bed, before turning in themselves. Before some unusual company arrived the next day.

End.

Please Read and Review.

I sincerely hope everyone has enjoyed this chapter and the training that began. This has been a topic that I have wanted to explore for a while. The logistical importance of a Naruto-ninja's hands would truly make the Black-leg style very useful and logical for them to use,

given how the entire jutsu could be sabotaged by any damage to their hands.

Now, this doesn't mean that each of them will learn that style to the same degree. As I do have plans for each of the ninjas to have their own interests and development. But, everything needs to start somewhere. And proficiency with this style would be very useful regardless.

Stayed tuned, as in the next chapter. It's time for Team 7, to meet the future King of the Pirates.

[1]-shattered pieces of a ceramic vessel, bowl or plate are called "sherds." Different materials than glass "shards." I am a professional Archaeologist, currently $\frac{3}{4}$ through a Master's degree. This distinction is important on professional grounds.

[2]-Might Guy has shown he can still be a viable fighter even after losing his leg during a mission with Kakashi (Naruto Novel: Ice in the Sky). However, using Guy as a baseline reference to measure all ninjas against is unrealistic and abstract, to say the least.

[3]-I have been practicing martial arts for years. Including Tae Kwon Do, Muay Thai, Gojuryo and Boxing. These comments are drawn from personal experience. Core muscles are essential to generate balance and power in a kick, keeping one set crunched in while the other set remains straight. Correlating to a person standing upright, raising one leg high enough to strike while the other remains on the ground. Also, it often takes years to eliminate the habit of a fighter tensing their arms and shoulders needlessly during drills, sparring or in a fight. Wasting copious amounts of energy by keeping these muscles flexed needlessly.

The Straw Hats Arrive

Chapter 6:

The Straw Hats Arrive.

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

At the dawn of a fresh day, shades of pink, blue, orange and yellow in the heavens made for a beautiful morning in the East Blue. Outside the Baratie, 3 twelve-year-olds had been waiting outdoors for some minutes for their sensei to arrive. One patiently leaned against the ship, arms crossed and staring at the skies. The second was pouring over a book, titled The Perfect Empire: North Blue under the Vinsmokes. While the third was pacing the deck, impatient, slighted, and jealous. "Sasuke!" the third figure shouted down to the water, stopping to lean over and his wave arms out. "Do ya gotta be showing off all the time like that? I get it, you learned it, but do ya have to keep reminding me, ya know?"

Sasuke let a smirk crack out on his face, glancing up to the deck where Naruto stood while remained standing on the water.

"Well, call it motivation, Naruto. This is what happens when you use your time wisely, instead of playing around with useless jutsu. Plus, this is you demanded Kakashi have such an early training session yesterday, right?"

Naruto was fuming, embarrassed and trying to think of a riposte. Sasuke's smug, joking voice hit a nerve, and one that the blonde couldn't deny. After the success of Zeff's Black-Leg Style seminar and seeing his teammates training on the water, the orange ninja had begged Kakashi to teach him the next evening, so much that it extend until past midnight until he agreed. But, many, many of the cooks complaining about missing their sexy-jutsu carpet walk if Naruto was preoccupied with training, again. So, a compromise was reached. The Ninjas would train in the mornings at the crack of dawn, and leave the evenings cleared for show time; Carne and Patty had even bought a stripper pole.

At the present, however, the Genin were on time and Kakashi had yet to show up.

'Hmmmm,' snapping her book shut, Sakura pursed her lips, pouting.

'I thought sensei was finally going to stay serious about training. But how come he's still late to show up? If only we knew wh.....'

"Wait a Minute!" to girl proclaimed.

"Sakura-chan?" Naruto responded.

"Ahhhh! Naruto, you're perfect!" the pinkette squealed.

"Huh! You, you think so!? I'm the perfect boy!" the knuckled head grinned, eagerly.

"Ugh! No! No, that's not what I meant!" the girl backpedalled, with a pink shade flaring across her cheeks.

"But you just said-"

"Don't get any ideas!"

The pair began bantering as Naruto tried to advance, and Sakura was shouting denials.

"Uggghhhhhh!" the pinkette shouted. "Listen. I know how to make sure Kakashi isn't late anymore. We're here on a small ship, the Baratie, aren't we? So there really isn't any place for him to hide that we can't snuff him out from. If you can send shadow-clones to search every room, they can track down and bagger him to finally come to us on time. There'll be no way he can be late over more than hours anymore!"

Kakashi hummed in his sleep. His body hunched over a desk in the small cabin. The lazy man's eyes were fighting against light pouring through a window, complacent to catch some extra sleep. His dreams were captured by a scene out of Icha-Icha Tactics. Two characters gazed on from across an empty square. Moving into a run, their bodies surged forward to be wrapped in the other's embrace. One character's generous bust jiggled with every stride, Until-

-A pair of blue sandals slowly filled the space "GGOOODDDD
MMOOOORRRRNNNNNIIIIINN NGGGGGGG
SSSSSEEEENNNNSSSSSEEEEEIII!"[1] Connected to the sandals was an orange figure, honing-in on Kakashi's face, feet-first.

One thunderous crash erupted inside the room. "So, Naruto. Tell me," Kakashi casually asked. "What kind of thought has motivated you to interrupt such a blissful sleep, with such an attack this early?" On his feet Kakashi had Naruto pinned to a desk, one arm pressing lightly on his head, the other hand keeping the boy's arm locked behind him, plus one leg lightly pinned under Kakashi's knee. The Uzumaki's face turned aside, with stars glittering in his eyes at his trolling sensei. "Wow! You are real good, sensei! How did you beat me while still asleep?!"-Ggghhhhhh! Never mind!" The boy shuffled, straining to get a better look up at his subduer.

"It's dawn now, ya know. You said you be training us! Come on, we're waiting, we're waiting!"

Three minutes later, the teacher and student were walking through the restaurant's front doors. 'Hhhhhh,' Kakashi tried to shake away shock and sleep from his eyes. 'I can't believe I actually pinned him down while half asleep. And they actually thought to attack me like that. Guy has never been that extreme,' Kakashi reflected on his rival. Which sent a pang of... longing. One that stopped him, cold. 'Oh, help me, am I actually nostalgic for him to pop out of nowhere?'

"Yesss!" Sakura was jumping with glee, breaking into Kakashi's reveries. "I knew it! I knew Naruto would get sensei's lazy ass down here! Yes!"

"Hmmm," Sasuke was beside her at the railing. "I have to admit. You really are pretty smart, Sakura." At the compliment, the girl froze in amazement. Before flopping to the ground, pasted-out with glee. "S..Sasuke..Sasuke... pretty smart... ahhhhhh." Her prostrated form muttered.

While Naruto tried to revive the girl, and Sasuke had a bemused look at the blonde teammate tried berating him, Kakashi merely watched on.

'Well. Naruto did something good for the whole team. Sakura hasn't hit Naruto at all since our talk back in Hanma Village. And Sasuke actually complemented Sakura for something. Maybe they are starting to grow,'

"Alright," Kakashi called out, once Sakura had awakened. "Let's get started."

"Alright," Kakashi called out, once Sakura was awake. "Let's get started."

For the following 3 hours, Kakashi lead them through different exercises, then separated the trio for individual skills. Sasuke was taken aside by Kakashi personally, to begin more focused training with his awakened Dojutsu. A trio of Sharingans were unveiled, two

for practice and the third to keep a sharp watch on the other students during their training.

As promised, Naruto began learning how to walk on water, starting by characteristically leaping overboard and getting soaked. After getting back aboard, some, simplified instructions were given, "Listen," Kaakshi coaxed him, "why not try holding on a ladder, and try to stand with only one foot, then both, but keep a hold on the rungs and, minimize another morning swim?"

"Uh, sensei?" Naruto asked, with a slightly white shade on his face. "What if any sharks come swimming up under me?" Sakura and Sasuke themselves both froze at that question, then slowly began turning their attention towards Kakashi. "Hm. Good luck?" the Jonin gave a shrug.

Everyone kept a much closer watch as Naruto continued trying, and duct under the surf a few dozen times, but only a few seconds later with each try. Sakura was instructed to work on her physical capabilities, sit-ups, push-ups, squats and running laps around the restaurant, either on the water or with her feet gripping the haul. The girl groaned under the effort, covered with sweat and quickly came to appreciate her sensei's training the least.

Nothing missed Kakashi's watchful eye, even while Sasuke received the majority of his attention. Conveyed through dozens of bruises spotting the Uchiha's arms, legs and head from building his reaction time with the Sharingan's perception.

Eventually, Zeff emerged from the restaurant calling his shinobi employees to work.

"Our destination is... The Sea Restaurant....Baratie!" Out on water several dozen meters away, a Caraval was sailing up, with a ram figurehead, and two jolly-rogers with a clear Straw Hat were billowing in the wind, clear as day; one on a black flag, the other painted across the sail.

"Oooooo. It's like a Big Fish!" A young man voiced, from a spot on the bow. The figure appeared to be fresh out of boyhood; grown, but immature and excitable, with blue shorts, a red shirt and headwear matching the flag.

Beside him, a scrawny boy with a cameo bandana, brown overalls, and a slingshot was drooling at the sight of the restaurant. Joining them was a tall, well-built, mature figure with green hair, and three swords tucked into a green belt on his waist. And busty young lady was present, wearing a pink T-shirt, light brown shoes and a yellow mini-skirt, with a smile of happiness and unmistakable orange hair. Two other figures behind them, armed with broadswords and folding their arms were grinning and shared a high-five.

Everyone was staring straight for their destination until a roaring ship's bell called their attention to the starboard[2] side of their ship.

"Huh!? A Marine Ship? All the way out here?" the boy with overalls panicked. Beside him, the swordsman braced, ready to draw his swords and the girl took a few steps sideways.

"Y-y-yo, Luffy," the panicking one was hiding behind him. "They're not gonna start firing on us, are they?"

"Luffy?"

Glancing around, the long-nosed crewmate saw his captain staring straight ahead, ignoring the Marine ship completely.

"WHOA! HEY! HEY, YOU! JOIN MY CREW!" Monkey D. Luffy exclaimed.

"Luffy!/Luffy!" the girl shouted, grabbing the boy at the same time Mr Long Nose did and both shook him like a bobblehead.

"Can't you act like a Captain at all? The Marines are right beside us!"

"But Nami, Ussop look! Look out there!" Captain Monkey D. Luffy explained, pointing towards the restaurant. "Some guy is standing on water! He's running over empty water!"

"Huh! Don't be silly. There's no... way... wah.... tha...." The navigator's words died in her throat. Usopp lost his grip, rubbed both his eyes then looked again. "H-h-h-h-h-h-h-h"

"WHOA!" Nami exclaimed. "H-H-WH-WHA-ZORO, LOOK! WHAT? HOW CAN THAT BOY BE DOING WALKING AROUND ON THE WATER!"

That caught the swordsman's attention, until he froze from glance towards the source of such commotion.

Now every person on board was gawking at the spectacle. Nami's jaw was scrapping the deck at her feet, and beside her, Usopp's eyes were wider than saucers and his mouth wasn't working in shock. Sure enough, at one side of the floating establishment, a boy with bright blonde hair was strolling around on the water, arms flailing about trying to stay balanced.

"Don't be distracted, darling," somebody else spoke, the Marine vessel alongside the pirate ship. "It's only a cheap ruffian's trick. Men! Sink them. They're an eye sore."

"Yes, Sir!"

Next, a loud cannon discharged.

"Hhhhh. Kakashi, why does Naruto get to train longer and not me?" Sasuke complained. Glaring mildly as the Jonin was lounging with a pink book open in one hand.

"Sasuke!" Zeff's grizzled tone roared. "That would be because Naruto did more work in here last night, and he needs the practice. If

you want ta join 'em, and keep going hard in the kitchen, bra! And KAKASHI!"

Zeff's left stump bore through the wall, missing Kakashi by inches. "What I say about that book out while you're working!" While Zeff glowered at his distracted bouncer, the Hatake remained buried deep in his new, golden edition Icha-Icha: paradise. 'Wow! Uoooo, hhhhh... hh..hehehehehe!' Ducking under another kick, he still didn't lose his place, nor after the third, seventh or thirteenth.

"Hold still you pervy brat!" Zeff exclaimed, peppering him with his peg leg, which the Jonin smoothly wove through, completely untouched.

"Oh, Chef." "What is it, Sakura?" Zeff called out, politely.

"Please, the ruckus really should stop. The booking for a Marine Lieutenant should be here any minute-" A loud explosion cut off Sakura's news, from outdoors.

"Huh!" Naruto exclaimed before he sank beneath the water, again. Quickly swimming back to the docks, the Genin spotted two ships a short distance away.

'Are those fighting that close to the restaurant! And what made a big roar that loud?'

"Naruto! What is-?"

"I'm okay, sensei," the boy answered, turning his neck up towards the deck above him. Scurrying up, he found Kakashi, Sasuke and Sakura had burst from indoors. "But something's going on over there!"

Back on the ship, the occupants of the pirate ship occupants were shouting at each other.

"You are all dedicated Marines! How can you miss such an easy target?" a figure with pink hair and iron knuckle-guards was berating those in uniform. "Reload, and aim properly!"

"Nothing like a nice fight to wake you up in the morning," the green-haired man was grinning, with Luffy to his right and Usopp further one, while Nami stepped back, eager to slip away, and the two passengers they had were running in circles. "Johnny, we gotta help big bro Zoro." "We fight the navy with pirates, we ain't gonna be bounty hunters anymore, Yosaku."

"You tell 'em, Zoro!" Usopp exclaimed, with his slingshot cocked back, with both his knees shaking under him. "Y-y-y-you'll never hit the Merry. I-I-I-I-I, thth-the-the B-Bre-Brave C-Cap-Cap-Captain Ussop wo-wo-won't le-let yy-you."

Luffy just palmed one fist into his hand, grinning up madly at the larger ship. "You wanna fight, come on and get it!"

"Fire, and sink the ship this time!" At the officer's word, a fresh cannon ball erupted from the Navy ship. It was streaking towards Luffy, Who threw both arms out, stretching his torso and capturing the iron ball in his elastic chest.

The impact caused the man to stretch backwards, bending out like an elastic snare. All on full display for the Leaf ninjas.

"Huh!"

"What..."

"Whaaaaaaa!"

"HOWISTHATGUYSTRETCHING!" Sakura exploded, while Kakashi just cocked an eyebrow.

"GUUMMMM-GUUUUMMMM: SLING SHOOOOOOO-" mid-sentence, Luffy's left hand slipped, with the impact still bending into his gut,

twisting him side-ways like a human sling-shot, aiming for the Baratie. "OOOOOAAAAAAAAWWWWAAAAAAA AWWWWWWAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Both the man and the cannonball went flying at the restaurant!

"Look out!"

"Hey Watch-!"

Kakashi moved, Naruto and Sakura ducked low, and Sasuke activated his Sharingan eyes. The cannonball grazed a mast on the floating restaurant, taking a chunk of wood out of it, and continued flying until a soft rumble was made in the distance. The 3 Genin watched it, bewildered. "Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke!" Kakashi's command snapped like a whip, as he materialized back on the deck with some company. "Get wooden planks and tools! Patch up the mast before it falls over like that pirate crew tried 2 weeks ago!"

At Kakashi's orders, all three Genin raced into the restaurant to gather the tools and supplies.

Meanwhile, the Jonin cocked his head, scanning his Sharingan over somebody draped over his shoulder, where Luffy hung and both his eyes were swirling in a daze. The Jonin grimaced. 'No chakra. How can somebody's body expand like that with it? At least I caught him before a fresh hole was made in the Cheff's cabin.'

"Huh? Hey, what stopped me? Hm?" The head with a straw hat turned sideways, and two black eyes met the sight of Kakashi. "Hi. I'm Monkey D. Luffy. And I'm gonna be King of the Pirates. You seen my crew?"

"Well now," the Jonin replied nonchalantly. "I'm Hatake Kakashi. Nice to meet you," he slid the headband back over his special eye. "You were about to hit this boat, but I caught you before that could happen."

"Huh? Really," Luffy asked. "Well, thanks for catching me, old guy." Kakashi blinked. "Old Guy? Is how you talk to everyone you just met?"

"Only the ones with grey hair like you got," the boy replied. "I've only seen that colour on old guys." Then, beside them, another rumble cut through the conversation, from the Marine ship. Looking outwards, a third cannon flew outwards, split perfectly in two halves. "My crew!" Eye-bulging, Luffy twisted out of Kakashi's grip, fell to the floor then sprang back up, again.

"HEY! Stupid Marines! We just got my ship, next you try and sink it? That's making me mad," shorting, steam flew out of Luffy's nose like a furious bull.

Then he bent both knees, gripped his left hand to his right arm and cocking it back.

"Ha! What are you going to do?" a slow-witted, pinstripe man gloated. "Punch me from that far away?" From his own spot, Kakashi noticed a trio of people on the pirate ship were stepping away, cautiously.

"Gum-Gum: Pistol" Luffy did indeed punch, throwing a fist that extended with a faint elastic humm, and kept flying to an unnatural length and struck the laughing man. The officer still had his head thrown back, where the blow nailed his chin; where it made a sickening crack and the fool went skywards towards the horizon.

Kakashi... stood at a loss for words, while the extendable arm snapped backwards, and the boy he'd saved just kept grinning.

"Kakashi-Sensei! Are you alright out here?" Sakura's voice cut into the scene, as she and the boys stepped through the door.

"Lieutenant Fullbody!" Suddenly, the Marine ship turned about, unfurling her sails, but didn't move. While the crew drew them back

in and started passing out oars, the pirate vessel made an easy cruise right up to the deck and a young lady hopped over the side.

"Hey, you can't just tie off, there," Naruto called over. "Ships gotta sail around back-"

"WOOOOO! You! Hay, you!" Luffy exclaimed, and Naruto got snagged by his shirt, yanked off his feet, and flew over between Luffy and Kakashi, held up by the pirate's arm.

"Huh! Wh-wh-what about me?" Naruto asked, "Why are you pointing at me?! What do you want!? Just say it, ya know." the boy shouted, back.

"You. Were you the guy walking on the water? You were doing that right over there, right?" Luffy interrogated him, his eyes glaring seriously.

"Ye-ye-ye-yeah, Yeah I was! Sensei," Naruto turned his head over at Kakashi. "I got it down, and I'm better than Sasuke, believe it!" Naruto claimed with a thumbs up.

"Sensei?" a girl's voice asked. Pulling Naruto's attention towards her, and his eyes blew open like expanding balloons at the sight of her; especially her legs, slim waist and chest. "You mean this guy with grey hair. he... was teaching you how to walk, on, water?" Asking the back half of the question, very, carefully, the new arrival was sucking in deep breaths to calm her excitement.

"Name." Luffy spoke up. "What is your name?" he was dead serious, and at the question, Naruto swallowed past a small lump in his throat. "I'm Uzumaki Naruto. The one and only!" Starring at the boy... Luffy came to a critical decision, in less than ½ a second.

First, he set Naruto down on his feet. Second,

sucking in a monstrously deep breath, the pirate held it. Third, he roared: "Naruto! Please! I beeteach you! Join. My. Crew!"

"Sooo...." Kakashi began to summarize. "You really want to head to the Grand Line. To fulfil a promise you made, and become the King of the Pirates. Something you've chosen to follow for the last 10 years, but only began this adventure weeks ago. And you selected Zoro, Nami, and Ussop to be a part of your crew to accomplish that."

"Uh-huh! That's right old-man." Luffy nodded, with a bright smile, stuffing a massive load of meat on a fork into his mouth. "That's certainly quite the ambition, Monkey D. Luffy," Kakashi continued. "Um. Do you mind sharing with us what the 'D.' stands for?"

"Hmmmm. Woo Ihhh Dwee-"

"Swallow first, then answer!" Nami shouted, comically smacking the captain's head.

Watching her, Sakura's eyes twinkled with admiration, Kakashi groaned at the sight, while Naruto cringed, and Sasuke frowned. All of the Ninjas were seated in the dining room, while various Naruto clones were scurrying around them, to give the quartet some time to discuss Luffy's demand for them to join him. The other five who'd come in on the same ship were seated around them, too.

"Shishishishishishishishi! Sorry, Nami. Old Man, about the 'D.' it's my name, so why think about it? So, when do the eight of us set sail ?" the man replied, taking another mouthful of food.

"Eight of you?" Sakura observed. "I thought you only count four people on your crew. Are Mr. Johnny and Mr. Yosaku members, and more, then?"

"Nope. Eight," Luffy answered her. "Zoro, Nami, Ussop, you, Naruto, Old Man Kakashi-"

"We never said that we would join you," Sasuke slid it. "Grant us some time to think it over. Do you know even know anything about us, at all?"

"Why'd I need that?" Luffy replied, without a care. Nami's eyes twitched, while Usopp grimaced and Zoro rolled his eyes, lifting a mug of beer to his lips. "You guys can walk on water," Luffy continued, "and I want you to join me. What else reasons are there? Haaummhhhhh-" the Straw hat took a chicken leg and tore half the meat off with one bite.

The crew had some treasure to pay for a meal, while Nami's was utterly free, naturally. With Sanji waiting on her, hand and foot. The girl smoothly ate an expensive dessert, while Zoro downed his mug and held a contemplative look on his face. Sakura and Sasuke both carried mixed feelings about this group. One was sceptical about them but kept eyeing their swordsman curiously. Sakura was off-put by Luffy's demeanour and already unimpressed with Usopp's tall tales. Yet when it came to Nami, she couldn't stop grinning, impressed by her beauty and demeanour, with a twinge of jealousy and a glance down below her neckline. While an Inner-persona had different opinions.

"Chaa! Learn to eat slower, Pig D. Luffy! And why can't our chest be as huge as Nami's! It's not fair" Then, the silhouette assumed a ponderous gesture; "But, getting the chance to find a way home sooner is pretty good!"

"Really! Naruto, that's brilliant!" the sniper exclaimed, cutting into her thoughts.

"I sure wish I'd thought of that prank back in my home town. But still," the liar leapt upwards, to stand on the table.

"I once made friends with a giant amphibious Sea-monster who loved chocolates! It scared everyone out of my village. While my men and I stole all the sweets from them and later shared them with the Sea monster."

"Really!" Naruto cried in amazement.

"You betcha, really. It was so-"

- "much of a lie it ain't even funny." Naruto cut-off. Leaving Ussop to fall flat on his face.

The blonde gave Ussop a deadpan look. "That story was so made up it can't be funny at all, Ussop. All of my stories are the truth, and I'm proud of it! I've never had to make-up a story about my pranks at all."

Everyone from Konoha groaned at Naruto's proclamation, while Ussop sprang to his feet. "Oh really!? And who can prove that? Mr. Buzz-kill Naruto?"

The blonde grinned. "Hey, Kakashi-sensei. Did I really paint every house on a street, back in our home village, and a giant picture of my face beside the Hokage Monument to show where I want them to put it!?"

The eyes of all those present turned towards the Jonin. "Ah? Naruto, you say something?" The boy froze, while the rest of the table was quiet until loose lips spilt a few chuckles out. Now Naruto took his turn as the butt of a joke, but immediately leapt forwards, repeating what he'd claimed, eager to get a better spotlight back.

"Ah," Kakashi turned his eyes up, clearly thinking back to, something. "Yes. All of that is absolutely true. I'm actually surprised even in a village full of ninjas, nobody could stop any of your pranks until after they happened."

Ussop curled into a ball, mopping in the corner. While Luffy burst out laughing, asking to hear more about Naruto's pranks.

"Stop right there, you Damn Pirates!"

"Do you mind!" Patty bellowed at the new commotions. "Your reservation already passed for that lunch date; you damn Marine!"

"Be quiet!" A pompous, indulgent cry answered the cook. A steaming man, still dressed in a pinstripe suit, stood in the doorway. With a

squad of Marines behind him, the Pink-haired officer shook his iron knuckles at the cooks.

"How dare you speak to a Marine Headquarters Lieutenant such disrespectfully!" calling in a high, shrilling voice, the man was panting, heavy and with a solid bruise on his chin. "I, Lieutenant Iron-fist Fullbody demand all your available manpower to apprehend these criminals!" Gesturing at the table occupied with the Straw Hats.

"These men assaulted me, a Marine Lieutenant, directly and are known criminals on the seas! Did nobody here see when his dirty trick defeated me!?"

"I did!"

"Finally, a reasonable and law-abiding man!" Fullbody exclaimed. "Give your statement now about how these men need to be arrested for their trick!"

"Trick? Are....do you have a memory problem, at all?" Kakashi was softly trolling him. "You shot at them out of the blue, missing their ship completely. Then on the second shot, your cannonball hit this restaurant. The captain got mad about that, and then you went flying off to the horizon. Though....maybe the hit on your landing caused some memory loss?" Kakashi summarized.

"Yes, that is precisely what-" the Lieutenant agreed with pride. Then grew cherry-red and gaped at the masked cyclops. "-WHAT!""

"Oh, I'm glad you remember." Kakashi complimented, patting the confessor's shoulder. "You know, it is deeply reassuring to see a Navy professional taking such responsibility. From your loyal crew rescuing you from the sea after such a blunder. And yourself committed to return and compensate the collateral victims of such losses you inflicted. Does everyone here agree?"

Over half the diners voiced their agreement, while the others snickered at the by-play. Yet Fullbody was caught between his own embarrassment and basking in the praise for his accountability to the restaurant.

"L-L-Lieutenant Fullbody, sir!" A new voice rang from the doors. "We-We've got terrible news! The Krieg pirate we've kept imprisoned has escaped! He's killed three men, sir!"

"Huh! What!?" Fullbody and his surrounding men gasped. "How? He was on the verge of starvation when we found him three days ago and we haven't fed him since!"

"I'm sorry, I don't know sir! Maybe he saw fewer men around and tried to escape!"

Fullbody stood tall, posing with authority. "Men, followed me, and secure that murderer!" Raising his iron-fist to rally them. The group dashed forward.

"Excuse me?" A voice came from the door. The Marines screeched to a halt, almost colliding with two people on the ground. "He's not a problem," Kakashi announced. The Jonin was kneeling down over a man clad in a green shirt, grey pants and a matching jacket with crossbones and a Red Serpentine dragon over his back. The captive's arms were pinned down, with Kakashi's right hand locked over their wrists, and his left flipping another page for the book in his right hand.

"Though, he did nearly shoot your man from outside before I knocked him over. Sakura, will you come retrieve the pistol under my left foot?"

The Marines gaped at the sight, trying to figure out when Kakashi had moved; while the Straw Hat Pirates were amazed, Luffy's eyes twinkling with awe. "SOOOO COOOOOOOLL!"

'How did he move that fast!?' Nami could barely comprehend.

While Zoro's eyes narrowed, dangerously. 'I've never seen such awareness and speed like that. This Kakashi is a dangerous one, no question.'

"Uh. Ye-yes Kakashi-sensei," Sakura hurried over, carefully taking a double-barrel pistol from the deck.

"Marine! Are you telling me you haven't fed this man at all for 3 days!?" Zeff exclaimed.

"WHAT! No Food For 3 Whole Days! That is just a bad thing to do!" Luffy exclaimed, his fist crashing on the table.

"Because he does not deserve any food," Iron-Fist Fullbody declared. "This is the Man-Demon Gin! An officer of the Krieg Pirate Armada, and murderous pirate. Not someone who deserves any comforts like food!" The man's nose was stuck high, filled with self-importance. Leaving him blind to the Head-Chef prowling towards him.

Each of the cooks, plus the ninjas and Ussop shivered at the sight. Most of them knew what was coming next.

"H-h-h-hhey. S-s-s-Sasuke wh-whatisthetallthatguy go-gonna do?"

"Hm," the Uchiha smirked. "Just watch. Those Marines are about to either cry or be sent flying, again."

"Huh!?" Nami stood up from her chair. "Where did Naruto and the blonde cook go?" Sure enough, both of the blondes had disappeared from the dining room.

"Get outa my place!" With a roar, Fullbody went flying, with each of the Marines kicked out after him. Though not until after Fullbody had fulfilled Kakashi's demanding suggestion and paid Zeff for the damage to his mast.

Once that was finished, Sanji and Naruto came out from the kitchen, with a large platter of seafood paella. Zeff was conveniently blocking Patty, while Kakashi moved Gin outside, dropped him in a corner of the deck then returned indoors. Sanji and Naruto stood beside Gin, placing the food before the Pirate. At the appetizing aroma, a deep, long rumble came from the man's stomach. Sanji leaned against the railing, taking a fresh cigarette, while Naruto kneeled down, pity filling his eyes.

"I don't want your charity," the murderous pirate spat. "Take... take the... take it away." He was unable to even say the word "food."

"Come on, you're hungry and need it. Even your stomach's getting mad at you." Naruto pleaded. Recalling some old memories of craving hot, fresh food when he was a small child. But not having the money to have some, as a lonely orphan.

"Keep... your damn pity," Gin growled with anger.

"Naruto, take a step back."

"But Sanji, he's just being stupid!" the Uzumaki complained. "He's gotta eat, and we ma-" The sous-chef lightly tapped Naruto's head with his foot. "I said take a step back. Come and stand beside me, kid."

Frowning, the stubborn boy just folded his arms and sat down near the dangerous man, refusing to move. Pouting with resistance, even as Sanji glared at him. Until a fresh rumble from Gin broke their staring contest.

"The sea is crazy, isn't it?" Sanji remarked, gazing in recollecting. "It can mean absolute death if you run out of food. I know what it's like to starve because of the sea. So, I can't stand seeing anyone go through that. Eat, and survive today so you can defend your honour tomorrow."

With that, Gin's resolve crumbled, and he unceremoniously began to shovel food into his mouth. While Naruto gazed at him and Sanji, blinking tears away from his eyes. The jinchuuriki was recalling the Hokage sharing fish, or another meal with him when he was small. Or Teuchi and Ayame giving him free Ramen despite not having the money. The only people to always treat him like a person in his own home, especially when he felt so down and alone.

'When I saw Sanji move off to the kitchen, I'm glad I followed him. And that Sanji let me help him cook up some food for this guy, no matter what he did. He's just soo cool.' Naruto thought, gazing at Sanji with worship in his eyes.

Soon after, Gin finished the meal and rose to his feet. The Man fixed Naruto with dead eyes, laced with anger and tears. The Blonde froze, 'He....he almost looks like... like Zabuza.'

"Excuse me," a familiar voice cut through the tension. Glancing to the sky, Sanji, Gin and Naruto found Luffy and Kakashi leaning on, the railing. "Given that we saved you from starvation. It would be more than dishonourable to attack one of them right now. Not to mention... drawing more trouble for yourself than the Marines could ever give you." The frigid warning would make lesser company shiver.

"Hm. Wasn't plannin' on it," Gin responded. "I merely want t' warn th' brat o' lettin' someone keep their dignity next time, instead ah takin' a front-row seat t' their shame."

Then he turned to Sanji. "Your food was so good," the pirate tearfully thanked him. "but I can't help think that you're gonna get fired because ah me."

"Don't worry about it," Sanji replied, as a splash rang off the to side. Turning their gaze, everyone saw Naruto had thrown the used dishes overboard. "There. No one can prove you ate that food anyways now. And I don't have to wash the extra dishes too, ya know," he grinned.

"Hmmm. Smart, kid," Sanji complimented him. "Don't sweat over it. I'm a cook, and feeding others is my job. No matter who they are or what they are. I'll feed them regardless of whatever they have done or will do next.

"That's it!" Came a loud declaration from the Straw Hat teen. "I'm looking for a cook for my pirate ship, and I want these ninjas to join too. You!" He pointed straight towards Sanji. "You're gonna be our cook!"

Sanji blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry, but I can't leave here. I owe the old man too much to do that."

"I refuse," Luffy answered, folding his arms and smiling at the sky. "Today my crew just got twice as big and it's not every lunch yet. My ninjas and my cook, that sounds like a pretty good day.

"I said, I'm not going to join you." Sanji casually replied while Kakashi lead Gin to a boat with some encouragement for him to leave the restaurant.

"Are you refusing me?" Luffy asked.

Sanji nodded, "That's right."

"Then I refuse your refusal!" Luffy declared, crossing his arms.

"THAT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU CAN DO, MORON!" Sanji exclaimed.

"Naruto, Sanji, Kakashi!"

"What, you damned geezer!"

Zeff hmped at the remark. "I need you to get back inside and get to work, brats! The ninjas still need to talk with those Straw hat kids!"

"Actually, may I barrow the older ninja for a little while?" a soft voice came behind the chef. Nami had moved out of the dining room, with

Sasuke, Zoro, Sakura and Ussop alongside her. The girl gave Zeff a pleading look that would even put puppy eyes to shame. "Zoro and I want to talk with Kakashi about him and the others joining our crew. And you wouldn't mind if Sakura and Sasuke are absent for a little while, would you?" Naturally, Zeff was helpless to refuse a lady's request.

"Hey, whaddabout me, Nami! You really shouldn't discuss things without the real captain." Ussop scolded, from a patronizing posture. "You're not the captain, Ussop. Go check on the Merry!" Zoro ordered him, with a slight shove sending the snipers on his way.

"Hey, guys!" Luffy sang out, then threw one arm backwards, looped it around Sanji and yanked him over. "I got us a cook, too. Say hi to our new crewmate."

"I'm not joining your crew!" Sanji exclaimed. "And I told you, I refuse your refusal," Luffy just kept grinning. "Say yes, and the eight of us can get going to the Grand Line!"

"Man, you've left me impressed today, captain," Zoro was grinning over at them. "First a guy that can walk over water like an easy stroll, then a cook so we can enjoy decent meals."

"I, said, NO!" Sanji roared, ducking low and sweeping Luffy off his feet. "If you want 'em, he's all yours." Behind the throng, Cheff Zeff stood there with his arms crossed. "I've been waiting for somebody to take that spoilt eggplant out of my hair for years. If you want 'em, take him."

"I ain't leaving, Geezer!" "Sanji, did you just refuse something from your head chef!" Zeff answered him. "When he's being a stuck mule, I'll kick that point through your head!" The two kept going back and forth, while Luffy fell over laughing, but Nami gently laced her hands between the younger ninja's fingers. Zoro took Sasuke by his shoulder then locked eyes with Kakashi, and nodded to one end of the deck. The group migrated a short way away from the argument.

"It looks like our captain is pretty distracted right now," Nami explained about Luffy.

"If you are going to join us, or, at least, you're interested to. There are a few things that should be discussed, don't you agree?"

"Such as what?" Sasuke spoke up.

"Well," Nami addressed them. "For, just a preliminary case. Please, jump down, and show all of us how you can walk on the water like Naruto can?"

"Ummm. Is that really the most important thing?" Kakashi inquired.

"Yeah. Why are you all so obsessed with how we can do that?" Sakura joined in.

"Because," Zoro replied. "Our captain is a Devil-fruit user. You already saw that he's a rubber man. And everyone who eats a Devil-fruit gives up the ability to swim the second time they take a bite. Anytime he falls overboard, Luffy needs somebody to fish him out again. That's why we want you guys on our crew, just as much as the Captain does."

The swordsman rubbed the back of his head, standing tall and ready. "Gotta say, that idiot doesn't have some good ideas with this kinda weight every day. But when they do come, he hasn't been wrong, yet."

Sasuke and Sakura pondered his reply, while Kakashi's eye narrowed. Sharp, for any useful information. "Alright, then." Hopping over the railing, Kakashi landed with a splash and casually strode out over the ocean. Looking back, he waved at Sakura and Sasuke to follow him, so they did. Needless to say, Nami was amazed, so much she had to grip the railing to remain on her feet. Even Zoro could not repress a face of awe and bewilderment at the sight.

"Yo. I imagine this does answer your question. Is there anything else about-?"

"No!" Zoro's strong tone replied. "You're joying us, no arguments from me."

Nami eagerly nodded. "And from your speed by catching Luffy earlier, stopping that Krieg Pirate, and we saw Naruto training before, you guys can probably fight in one way or another. Asking you guys to join us was really smart on Luffy's part...."

Immediately, the girl's jaw went slack. Flabbergasted at her own compliment. 'Luffy.....smart... Did I really just say that?'

Zoro had the exact matching sentiments. "Never thought I'd actually agree with that, much less hear it aloud, Nami. Maybe there's hope for that idiot, yet."

"Good to know." Kakashi's voice yanked their attention back to himself, Sakura and Sasuke. "Since that concern is resolved. There... are some rather crucial things you... really should be aware of." Immediately, Kakashi vanished in a blur.

"Huh, where'd h-"

-"Here." A whisper, soft as a breeze, tickled her ear. Nami jumped back, while Zoro's hand flew to his blade.

Within an instant, Kakashi had materialized behind them. Driving the pair of Straw Hats off-balance, just as he wanted to. "We're not like anyone you have met before. The Grand Line means one thing to all four of us. One thing alone and cannot be negotiated." Turning to Zoro, the Pirate-Hunter froze. The gaze in Kakashi's eye pierced him, leaving the man frozen in place.

'Whh... what is this feeling,' Zoro furiously thought. 'It's not fear that's gripping me... something else. That look... Desperation?'

"Home," Kakashi declared. "Four weeks ago, Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura and I were all ripped away from our home island. A place that has been closed off from the rest of the world for centuries; to the point that we cannot find it on any maps here in the East Blue. We think it's somewhere close to the Wano Kingdom, but that's all I have. The Grand Line is our way home, and once we find it, we want to stay. There."

"If we do join you, then it will be temporary. Plus, we are ninjas, and have our own sense of honour. We will not attack anyone to oppress them, nor do we wish to run into any incidents that would reveal our capabilities to people like the Marines, the Warlords, or other Pirates Crews and bring them down on our home."

The Jonin's eyes cast over Nami and Zoro. Zoro's face remained confrontational, meeting Kakashi's gaze with barely a flinch. While Nami seemed shaken, her eyes looking far away. Kakashi recognized that look, one that was more in the past, than the present.

"Pass these terms on to your captain. If he accepts them, then maybe we can become crewmates." Kakashi grinned, slipping into a cool and jovial demeanour.

As they nodded, he went back inside. To spot Ussop, Luffy and Naruto huddled together. Muttering in hushed tones, clearly plotting something. The sight made Kakashi gulp, fearful of what the consequences would be.

While Sakura and Sasuke remained outside with Nami and Zoro. Sakura was apologizing to Nami over Kakashi's demeanour and inviting her for some girl-talk about different places she had been. While Sasuke gave Zoro a hard look. Once the swordsman returned; causing the boy to flinch. "Something you want, kid?"

"Training," the Uchiha bluntly requested. "I saw you training earlier on your ship. I need to grow stronger and learn how to fight better. I want to train with you tomorrow."

Zoro eyed the boy carefully. He didn't reveal anything, but the purpose in Sasuke's eyes piqued his interest. 'I've seen that look in the mirror, and in Kuina's gaze, too. This kid has a goal, and he's driven to fulfil it, no matter what cost is demanded from him.'

"Hmm," the swordsman hummed, curiously. "I've never had a student before or found anyone who could keep up with the kind of training that I do. Still, if you're going to join us, then we can't have anyone weak just tagging along for the ride."

"Alright. You can join me tomorrow. Let's see what you can do kid. Plus, if we end up fighting together, then knowing what the other is capable of would be a good place to start."

Sasuke grinned at Zoro's reply. "Good. Out of curiosity, what rank do you have in your crew?"

"Ranks?" Zoro cocked an eyebrow. "We've only been together a couple of weeks back. Plus, a crew of four people is a little small to be concerned about ranks other than the captain. Otherwise, Ussop is a sniper, I'm a swordsman, and Nami is our navigator. We actually just came here to find a cook. Adding four ninjas to this crew is a welcome bonus."

Sasuke was surprised but nodded. He'd assumed from Zoro's serious personality, the swordsman was the 2nd-in command. Though he didn't press the issue.

End.

[1]-Scene borrowed from my singular favourite scene from Bleach. "Goood Mooorrrnnnnnnnggggggg Ichigoooooo!" (check youtube, absolutely hilarious).

[2]-For anyone who doesn't know, one means to always ID "port" and "starboard" on a ship, are the letters. "Port" and "left" are the same direction, relative to the bow, and both are shorter words, with 4

letters apiece. The "starboard" and "right" are longer and correlate to each other.

Ninjas and Pirates

Chapter 7:

Ninjas and Pirates.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

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"Join my crew. Come on, it'll be fun!"

"I told you, I'm not leaving here to join your crew!" Luffy kelt, pouting at Sanji's exclamation, then folded his arms over his chest. "Well I'm not leaving here until you join us. We need a cook, and you're the one I pick to be him. Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura and Old Man already said 'yes.' Why not come to sea with them?"

Sanji growled at this dilemma. 'He's been at this for the last 3 days. I can't leave here due to my promise to the old man. I need to repay that until the day he dies,' he reminded himself. 'This idiot's got to get tired eventually. So, I'll just wait until he finally gets the point and leaves. And takes Naruto's sexy-jutsu with him...'

"AHhhh!" The pervy cook began to yank at his hair, thinking back to drooling over a nude woman so regularly, 'But when Naruto leaves us... no more Naruko.'

"What's with the whining, brat?." Zeff's voice rang through the kitchen. "You've got my permission to take Sanji. Besides, that brat

Naruto would want him to come as well. He's yours, so the both of you, git got."

"Shut it, geezer! I'm not leaving here until the day after you die. Nobody gets pawn me off like some commodity!" While the pair began a fresh argument, Kakashi eyed the kitchen doors, chuckling. 'Well, Zeff did order me to only keep order here in the dining room, at least that problem isn't anything to worry for. I do wonder though, why he's trying to push Sanji to leave despite how close they are.'

Meanwhile, Sasuke and Zoro were outdoors, on the deck of the Straw Hat's ship: the Going Merry. Sasuke's torso ached, his arms searing from muscles overused. The boy could feel Zoro's eyes on him, spurring Sasuke on to complete his exercises to the swordsman's standards.

Sasuke had followed through on his request to train along with Zoro. After Zeff approved of it, the Uchiha had been spending more time with the warrior for enough hours, he'd practically resigned from the Baratie. While Naruto continued to work with Sanji on learning the Black-leg style, taking to it with more enthusiasm than the rest of Team 7, but still balanced his time between the restaurant and learning ninja skills. Sakura only completed the bare minimum every morning when Team 7 trained under Kakashi's watch, before getting to work in the restaurant or spending time with Nami.

On their first morning, Sasuke was amazed to see Zoro was already working through his sword-katas. First, Zoro sent the boy to run laps across the water; with any protest silence by the point of a sword tapping Sasuke's nose. "If you want to train, follow what I say with no refusal or complaints, kid. If you don't like it, you can walk away with nothing at any time."

Zoro's serious mood sparked new respect from Sasuke, and in a blink, he took off running. After 10 laps, Zoro called him back and tied a series of weights to Sasuke's arms, legs and back. Then sent him out again. 20 laps later, Sasuke was exhausted; both physically and mentally from the strain of keeping his chakra constant and

fight-off drowning. This was followed by strength exercises, push-ups, jumping squats, sit-ups, and more. Zoro even worked on hand-stand lifts with the boy. While Sasuke was amazed at the sight of Zoro doing the same with a single arm.

This was followed by sparing, Zoro with his blades while Sasuke used kunai and shuriken. Kakashi demanded to supervise it, as the Pirates had not completely earned the Jonin's trust. Initially, Sasuke had not believed his Sharingans were necessary; but Zoro's unique and practised technique proved that notion wrong. The Genin was slightly faster and more agile, but not by a decisive margin. Zoro's combination of strength, practised speed and focused technique forced Sasuke to use his eyes to make up the difference.

This had been followed by some explanations about them, to the entire crew; though Kakashi and Sasuke avoided any private details about Sasuke's clan. Now Zoro watched carefully as Sasuke was on his 13th hand-stand lift.

"I'll admit. You're doing pretty well, Sasuke. But your physical prowess is only admirable to a basic person; nothing really exceptional yet. Keep work, then we'll start sparring before Kakashi and I go again." The swordsman smirked at the last comment.

Sasuke gritted his teeth, chaffing under someone commenting on him being less than exceptional. But he couldn't spare the breath to argue without collapsing in a heap. The Uchiha grit his teeth and began to focus on the exercise.

Kakashi moved outside and eyed the pair, carefully. He'd been on the docks before, keeping a close watch on Sasuke during his run in case the Genin fell in the water, and perhaps drowned from the weights. 'Hmmm. Sasuke's strength really is less developed than his speed. And sparing with Zoro has improved his perception with his Sharingan. This training isn't so bad for him. And....' Recalling one detail, Kakashi brought one hand to his temple. 'And I have promised Zoro that sparring session, soon. I suppose, finding out his abilities is a priority. Still, I would rather read more of Icha-Icha Tactics.'

On their first day, Naruto had begun to share stories about the Leaf Village with the Straw Hat Pirates. His version of the truth was far from humble, even painting himself as the top student in the academy and immensely popular with everyone. Sakura and Sasuke intervened and told a more honest version. Including their adventures in the Land of Waves.

Inevitably, Zabuza came up and made Zoro very excited.

(Flashback)

"Swordsman! Seven of them?" A hungry tone came from the Santoryu-inventor.

"Yeah. Zabuza was one of the most renowned swordsmen in our home island. Part of the 7 Swordsmen of the Mist. Each one with a unique weapon, and very deadly skills." Sasuke explained.

"Hmmm," a growl reverberated through the restaurant; filled with lethal excitement. Sakura and Nami trembled, while Johnny and Yosaku traded fearful looks; 'Big-Bro Zoro's way excited. This ain't good!'

"Y-y-yeah Mmr. Z-Zoro." Sakura brokenly replied. "Zabuza r-really-wa-was-"

"Oi, oi. You really should tone down your excitement, Zoro. It's scaring the customers," Kakashi interjected. "..and my Genin." A threat hung in the air. Zoro noticed it clearly, easing back into his chair and taking deep, measured breaths. Still, that didn't inhibit him from speaking with Kakashi. "So, from what Sasuke described, this Zabuza, had quite a ferocious reputation. A Demon among killers." Zoro inquired.

Kakashi was quite a moment, drawing more of the swordsman's attention. "Zabuza was known as the Demon of the Hidden Mist, and gained that reputation long before he ascended to the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist."

Now, the Pirate Hunter's exhilaration was clear to see. "And he was defeated by you?"

"Yes." That one syllable. At the sound, Zoro clicked a white katana from its sheath. Soon, he was at his feet and marching to the kitchen door.

"In that case. You and I are going to spar with each other, right now," he invited, without waiting for an answer. "I want to see where my skill would measure against this Demon Swordsman, and your experience is the best way to do that. Plus, if we're headed to the Grand Line then we'll need to know what each other can do, and how skilled they are. Follow me outside for a spar!"

The man strode forward with passion and focus. But as for his quarry.

"Ummm. Zoro. Not everyone's as eager to spar as you, and I'm quite comfortable right here. Kakashi lazily settled in, waiting for his own dinner to arrive. "Besides, if you want to spar, shouldn't we move to the front door, not further inside?" gestured his thumb towards the right direction.

(Present)

Since then, Zoro and Kakashi had sparred twice and the other with reasonable impressions. The Pirate Hunter wasn't skilled enough to drive the Hatake to need his Sharingan, but Zoro's might, dedication and innovation with his own distinct style, impressed Kakashi.

'He is a far cry from Zabuza's league overall,' Kakashi reflected as he watched Zoro spar with Sasuke. 'Still, regarding the degree of his skill with pure swordsmanship. He's very close to Hayate and Yugao. They would likely win over him, but only after using a blend of Ninjutsu techniques and swordsmanship rather than solely from their skills with a blade. On top of that, his own strength and training regimen is almost comparable to Guy's.'

'He's also a fast learner, no question there. He's already applying some advice I gave him after our second spar and is clearly growing more and more every time he fights.'

Kakashi continued to follow Zoro and Sasuke's sparring match, with the Uchiha clearly losing against Zoro's might and pure skill. Yet, the older teen was more measured and observant against the Uchiha; with fewer holes in his guard than against Kakashi two days earlier.

Meanwhile, inside the restaurant, Sakura was writing a bill for some satisfied customers with a smile on her face. The girl's long pink hair glistened as the doors opened, letting the sunlight gleam through it, thanks to some products loaned to her from Nami.

Naruto was chatting with Ussop at one table the Straw Hat's sniper and navigator were seated, alongside the bounty hunters Johnny and Yosuku. After she finished with the customers, Sakura walked between the tables until she reached Nami's and slid in beside her.

"Uhg... I'm so glad you came here, Miss. Nami. Being the only girl around all the boys here was getting impossible to handle!"

The Navigator beamed, enjoying her time with the younger girl. "I can agree. It can be a challenge to handle all boys on the crew, but it's never a problem if you keep them under your thumb." A sinister grin crossed Nami's face, while Ussop and Luffy left an ice tremor down their spines. "By the way, that shampoo I loaned you really did wonders for your hair," the busty navigator complemented Sakura.

"Oh!" Nami shot to her feet. "Before we talk about anything else! You owe me 6,000 bellies for that shampoo!"

"What! I-I-I thought you were loaning it to me?" Sakura asked, perplexed.

"Yeah! But I can't just take back the amount that you used. Pay up, girl, that bottle was worth 40,000 bellies!" Nami demanded. Neglecting to mention how it had been a gift from Kya, for free.

"Hey!" the pinkette exclaimed. She tried to argue with the Navigator, but couldn't make any headway. Grumbling, Sakura went stomping upstairs to her room. After taking the right amount of cash, she returned to Nami and handed over the money. Which immediately had the greedy girl giggling with delight. Sakura actually gulped, watching Nami stroke the bellies adoringly, before hiding them in her cleavage. "Wow. You really like money a lot, don't you Miss. Nami."

"Of, course I do! You can't get anywhere in the world without it!" the navigator proclaimed. "That's why you even start working here, to earn cash and travel to your home, right?"

Sakura nodded at the point. "Yeah. Our home...." A wistful look crossed her face. Nearly a month had passed since she had been ripped out of the Elemental Nations and placed in this strange new sea. All the time, away from her parents, friends, and familiar surroundings. They were taking their toll on her.

Surprisingly, a comforting arm draped over her shoulders, pulling the girl into a comforting hug. Nami had noticed a change in Sakura's mood and felt a compelling sense to comfort her.

"Hey. You'll make it back home if you have the determination to do it. And now you've got us to help travel to the Grand Line and find your island!"

Glancing up, Sakura eyed a strange smile on Nami's face. Reaching the orange-hair's eyes, but awkward and solemn. As if.....it rarely ever came, and spoke of how the girl was familiar with hopelessness.

When out of nowhere, a ruckus erupted from the Dinning Room's front door! Twisting or twangs, mixed with a small explosion and even fireworks. "Shishishishishishishishishishishishishi!" "GHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Owwweeee! We got you so good, Kakashi!" Usopp called out.

"Big Bro Kakashi!" Johnny and Yosaku cried. The pair shot to their feet, causing piles of wanted posters to scatter about.

In the doorway, the Jonin was caught in a net, covered with feathers, and splattered with neon-orange paint. Courtesy of a small cannon in the corner of the door, and several well-placed throws from a Naruto clone. Ussop collapsed where he stood, in the blind spot of the corner, overwhelmed with glee.

"Ghahahahahahahahaha! We got you good! Didn't we sensei! You didn't even see the net when that horn went off! Believe it!" A certain orange-Genin gloated with pride.

Some customers were amused or frustrated by the prank, including Nami. While Sakura was fuming on the outside, Inner-Sakura was cheering over their success. "CHAA!-HA-HA-HA-HA, that looks hilarious!" Zeff, Luffy and Sanji had come from the kitchen and gaped at the sight. With the Straw Hat Captain barrelling with laughter.

"Huh. So, you finally set off that prank, didja, brats?" Zeff muttered while Sanji was trying to smother a chuckle.

"Heh, yeah we did!" Ussop proclaimed. "Just an air horn rigged to the door to distract him, pulling his attention away from the corner I was in. Then the net went off, followed by Naruto throwing paintbombs, and my feather cannon!"

"Hahahahahaahaha! Ussop, you really are a genius! Now he can't sneak around anywhere like a Ninja should, believe it!" Naruto cheered. Using those smaller paint balloons to avoid getting stains on the walls or other spots was really great."

"Excuse me." A familiar voice came. Everyone froze. Then looked back to the door. Where a 2nd Kakashi was standing, green book in hand, and untouched. "But, you missed."

Immediately, the Kakashi in a net dissolved into smoke. "I noticed you were planning something for a while. Ussop. Naruto. So, after somebody was creeping under the window near the doorway, I decided on a wise approach. Just, sending a clone in ahead of me."

Everyone gawked at the Jonin. While Ussop and Naruto began sulking, disappointed and depressed over wasting their prank on a clone-Kakashi. While the rest of the restaurant began to laugh. Naruto even made a pout, then walked off, snagging Usopp by his shoulder-strap, and muttering about "need a better trap."

"WOOOOOO, You can be mystery copies, too?" Luffy shot forwards, inspecting the net and looking between it and Kakashi. "That many guys, you'd be awesome on a ship! We'd even get more help in a storm, or bad seas like Shanks would say."

"Hey, that is a good... point..." Nami's mouth gaped open, mentally piecing together how such clones could be of use on a sailing ship. But 'Did that idea just come... from Luffy?'

"Well, I am his teacher, aren't I," the Jonin answered Luffy, with a shade of strategic details omitted.

"Awe man!" Johnny complained while he and Yosaku began to gather up the papers they'd spilt. "Hmmm?" Sakura noticed one poster by her feet. 'What is this? A man. He looks strong, with a gold chain and fur coat, wavy hair and sideburns. But I can't make out these markings.'

"Hey, little-sis Sakura. Checking out that Wanted Poster?" Yosaku enquired with her.

"Wanted? So, this man is a criminal?" the girl asked, her sharp mind buzzing. "Is this how you and Johnny find different criminals to chase down? I can't read the writing here."

That lead the shaven man to blink. "You can't read? Isn't that a little dumb, little sis?"

Suddenly, Yosaku's head got knocked into a table, plus he felt solid kicks land on his chest. After a moment, he grasped how he was flat with a few sore spots on his face. And before them, a fuming Sakura raised her fist. "Dumb? I am one of the smartest people you will probably ever meet!" the girl leered at him, angered by the insult to her only source of pride; her intellect.

"I've just never seen this type of writing before. Do you ever use your head? If I couldn't read, how could I write up bills or catalogues for this restaurant? It's nothing more than that, got it?"

"Whoa there, little sis." Johnny stepped over. "Yosaku was just a little surprised. Th-that's no reason to hit 'em. And yeah, actually that pirate right there is the one the Gin guy who broke away from the Marines is connected to. Don Krieg, a Pirate commodore with 5,000 men. Basically, if Yosaku and I can beat these guys in a fight then we get the reward money."

"Wow," Sakura murmured, her eyes falling to the amount listed.

"Yeah, it's a pretty lucrative business, huh little sis. That guy is worth a lot too, 17,000,000 bellies, the second highest in the East Blue."

"17,000,000!" Sakura exclaimed. "Wh... what did this guy do to earn that much! That's more than the baseline charge for an S-class mission back home!"[1]

"Wow. That' pretty... uh....big sis Nami." Johnny asked, cautiously.

Yosaku and Sakura glanced at the older girl, spotting her clenching one poster in his hands.

"Miss Nami? You're trembling." Sakura called out to her.

"Hhh-hhh-Huh?!" the navigator glanced up, to find each of them eying her carefully.

"Uh..oh, uh, nothing. It's nothing at all," fooling nobody as she slid the poster behind her.

"You... are you sure, big sis?" Johnny pried. "You know who that poster was, right? That someone is a little too much for Yosaku and me to go after. We'd probably lose, but only just. Still, even just by a little, that guy might kill us."

The other bounty hunter nodded, slipping the other posters back into his pocket. Then recoiled a few steps. Nami fixed the boys and Sakura with a hateful glare.

Everyone dropped the topic and returned to their regular activities. A handle of hours later, The Pirates, Bounty Hunters, and Ninjas gathered out on the Going Merry. Heavy fog had dropped in across the waters. A blanket of eeriness and foreboding cast over the sea.

"Well," Kakashi began. "I just finished talking with Zeff this morning. He's disappointed to see us go but doesn't have a problem with Sakura, Sasuke, Naruto and I leave with you, Captain Luffy."

The future Pirate King grinned with excitement at the news. "Great! You guys are gonna be big, big, big nakama with us."

"I'll admit," Zoro spoke up. "Asking the four of you to join us was a really great choice, Luffy. And not just because they can walk on water either."

Ussop grinned, "Yeah, Naruto is totally awesome too! Plus, he and I really need to catch Kakashi in a prank sometime, huh, Naruto?"

The Jinchuuriki blinked in awe. For the first time in his life, he was....welcomed. Someone had loudly praised him. And proclaimed they wanted him along. Accepting him with question or hesitation. The boy could barely speak.

"I agree with them too," Nami chimed in, seemingly different from how he'd been with the wanted posters earlier. "And it's great to

finally have another girl around, huh Sakura."

"Oh, yes, I agree Miss. Nami." Sakura answered. "Finally, Girl Power Grows!" Inner Sakura exclaimed. "CHAA-Miss. Nami and I are going to rule this crew!"

"Hmm. I'll admit, going with them means we might get back to the Leaf Village again," Sasuke commented. "Your captain is a bigger idiot than our idiot, but if I can train with Zoro more often and get stronger, then that's fine by me."

"Hey! Captain Luffy's awesome, and I ain't an idiot, Sasuke!" Naruto complained. "Did I say your name, aloud, Naruto?" Sasuke bit back. Naruto's response died on his lips, while the Uchiha wore a very satisfied smirk, "You agree with me, between the four of us, that Kakashi nor Sakura can be 'the idiot?'" That sent Naruto spluttering as a steam cloud of shame came building out of his ears. Until Luffy strode forth, standing proud and eager to begin adventures with his newest Nakama. "Right! But, we cannot leave yet." The ravenette palmed his fist, lightly. "I still need to convince Sanji to come with us, as our cook. Then we'll be ready to head out!"

"Ummmmmm. Maybe," Kakashi interjected. "But before that, perhaps we should introduce ourselves to each other, Captain Luffy."

"Hm. Why? You're coming with us, so what's so big about that?" the often-clueless captain replied.

"Oh.....habit?" Kakashi shrugged. "In our home village, new groups often start like this. We talk about..likes. Dislikes. Hobbies. Goals. Abilities. Just some general stuff since we barely know each other too well."

"Makes sense," Zoro replied, seriously. "Why don't we alternate. One of us, then one of you. Care to start off, Kakashi?"

"Hmmm. Alright. My name is Hatake Kakashi. I like my cute little Genin, Naruto Sasuke, and Sakura... anything else. I guess you

might find out with time. Things I hate... I don't really feel like sharing those. My dreams for the future... nothing noteworthy. As for my hobbies. Well, I have a lot of them."

"My skills and abilities." Zoro and Luffy leaned forward eagerly at this topic. "I have many different ones. The details are not important. And there, you everything to know about me." Each of the Straw Hats frowned, while Team 7 pouted over the same repetition from their instructor back in the Konoha Academy.

"Well," the Jonin eye-smiled at the group. "Now how ab-" Kakashi's hand snatched Luffy's fist inches from his head before Zoro struck from behind. One sheathed sword was caught, while the other nailed Kakashi from his blind spot.

"Sensei!" Sakura and Naruto cried. "Hey, what gives Captain Luffy! What did that come out for!?"

Kakashi rose to his feet, rubbing a purple shade covering his one good eye.

"You know, Captain Luffy. It's really not a good idea to simply abuse your own crew on a whim."

Luffy frowned, confused.

"Huh? 'Abstuse?' What does that mean? You weren't telling anything big or exciting, Old Man. You talked about sharing things about us, so share already. Tell me something interesting. Oh, hey, can ninjas poop?"

A few people did choke over that until Usopp saved the situation.

"Now listen here, and ignore that question from Luffy," Usopp announced. "Why should we trust you with knowledge about ourselves if you aren't willing to tell us anything about yourself. Or how can we fight together properly if we barely know anything about your skills?"

"He's right," Zoro chimed in. "Now all of you are new here, so listen up. First, the Captain wants to know more about you, Kakashi. Here on the Merry, his authority is the highest. That is indisputable. And Second. This isn't a case of you working with other ninjas. We're pirates now, part of the same crew on a ship. The trust for that needs to go a lot deeper than just knowing a person's name."

Kakashi's eye swept over the assembly, all firmly together in their desire to learn more about it. "Do you even know how'ta tell somebody about you?" Luffy asked, his head cocked sideways. "Hey, I'll show what you should really tell us," Luffy decided, standing tall with his hands on his hips. "My name is Monkey D. Luffy. I like meat, adventures, fighting, and this Straw Hat! I dislike cowards, people who hurt my friends, or those who don't care about dreams. I ate the Gomu-gomu Devil Fruit and became a Rubber Man. And someday..."

Slowly, the raven-haired teen raised his arm to cover his hat. Grasping the Straw hat, tenderly.

"I am gonna be the King of the Pirates. I decided that a long time ago, and I've never looked back."

The Konoha Genin stared at the boy; one with amazement, three with despair.

'He cares about food, adventures, and a near-impossible ambition. Just like Naruto.' Sasuke observed.

'Great. Another one.' Sakura bemoaned.

"Nooooooo! How will we survive with a second Naruto around! Ahhhhhh!" Inner Sakura was moaning.

While Kakashi sighed in resignation. "Well. Guess I have no choice," in a rueful tone. "Alright. You already know my name. I like my Genin students, books, dogs, and training," the Jonin confessed. "I hate

people who abandon or betray their comrades. I am known as the Man who Mastered 1,000 jutsu. And my dream....well, one is to get my Shinobi Team back to our home. Another... maybe to make up for all the mistakes I made in the past...."

A dark mood fell over the Jonin, reaching out across the new Pirate crew.... "And all the people I betrayed and failed," he finished with deep-seated, guilt.

Naruto was deeply surprised at learning more about his sensei. As was Sakura. 'How much has sensei suffered from? And does he hate himself for neglecting others?' Sasuke was the least perturbed. Silently, he recalled their talk back in Hanma village, and the loss of Hatake Sakumo. While their new crewmates were either excited at Kakashi's reputation or curious, even apprehensive, of his words.

Particularly Nami about betrayal and abandonment.

She froze as Kakashi's single eye rested on her. "W-what! What is it?"

"Oh. Well, you already have my name, Nami. I like money, navigating and Tangerines, and that's about it. I dislike pi-..." The girl took a side glance at Luffy before she continued. "I dislike murderous pirates and giving away money to anyone. I can sail a boat almost anywhere on the East Blue and am pretty good with a bo-staff. And my dream is to one day draw a complete map, of the whole, entire, world," her arm spread out to emphasize her dream.

Kakashi nodded, quite surprised at the answer.

'They have some, similarities. But she's almost the opposite of Sakura. Focusing on ambitions and the material world, rather than boys or romantic dreams.'

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey! Can I go next! Can I!" Naruto was jumping to catch their attention.

"My name is Uzumaki Naruto, believe it! I like Ramen, my sensei Kakashi, the Straw Hats, the cooks here at the Baratie, Chef Zeff, Sanji-sensei, and learning their black-leg fighting style. I dislike people who hurt others just because they can, or want to, or get greedy. I also dislike the 3 minutes you have to wait after pouring water into an instant-Ramen cup before you can eat it. My hobbies are eating different types of Ramen and comparing them. And my dream is....."

A wistful look came over the boy's face, reminded of how distant his dream truly was. Yet, calling on practised habits, an unseen mask slipped over his face to drive those feelings down. "My dream is to get back to Konoha, and then become the Hokage, someday. That's the best ninja in our village. Once I become Hokage, everyone will have to start treating me like I'm someone important and strong!"

Luffy couldn't help but nod at Naruto's dream, and his love for food. Zoro and Usopp nodded, each finding something they respected. While Nami was surprised by the boy's demeanour.

"Hey, Zoro. It's your turn," Luffy declared.

"Fine," the swordsman replied. "My name is Roronoa Zoro. I like swords, booze, training, fighting, and opponents who can challenge me. I dislike cowards, or those who would give up on their own dreams or aspirations. I invented my own sword style, the Santoryu three-sword-style, and I like trying different kinds of Sake. Plus a few other things I don't want to share. Otherwise... I don't have a dream."

Slowly, the man raised a trembling hand to his swords. "What I have is an ambition, and a promise."

That caught everyone's attention. Especially Sasuke and Kakashi.

"To become nothing less, than the World's Best Swordsman.

The Kakashi spoke up.

"So. Why have you become a Pirate? I heard from a few customers that you were known as a Pirate-Hunter Zoro. It's... a confusing paradox now. Wouldn't you say?"

Zoro shrugged.

"Someone else gave me that name. I never adapted it myself. A while back I faced down a pompous Marine, and the bastard decided to execute me. I couldn't fulfil my promise if I died. Since I officially fought against the Marines, I figured why not become a pirate? Luffy made me an offer and saved my ass, so I accepted."

"That right, I sure did!" the captain declared, yanking Zoro in a playful headlock.

"Besides, the King of the Pirates wouldn't have anything less than the best on his crew. That's why I decided Zoro would become the first member of my crew. Even if he said no."

"Really?" Kakashi observed. "And now, you want the same thing to happen with Sanji?"

"Uh-hu!" the captain's head bobbed with excitement.

'Well.....looks like Sanji might be coming with us in the end after all.' The Jonin silently mused.

"Uchiha Sasuke." A new voice cut through everyone's attention.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I barely like anything, but I do enjoy training, taking long walks, and developing my Sharingan. I dislike too many things to count, and I especially hate one... person," Sasuke confessed. "I don't have any hobbies at all. But what I do have..." His Sharingans flared to life. A prior talk with Kakashi led him to think back on the day his life was shattered. He clearly saw the memory and the figure responsible.

"What I have in an ambition," a dark glare settling over the boy. "My ambition is the get back to the Elemental Nations. So, I can restore my family. And destroy, a certain... someone."

Nami and Ussop were shaken. While Kakashi noted the small changes in Sasuke's answers from the first he gave back in their home village. Luffy eyed Sasuke carefully, his own thought travelling back to a brooding boy he met, sitting atop a dead bear. While Zoro took special note and interest in Sasuke's answers.

The swordsman and the Uchiha met each other's glare. Both felt the weight, the burden, behind their different ambitions. The bond between both was growing.

"Alright," Luffy's voice cut through them. "Hey, Ussop. Your turn.

"Huh! Uh-uh-ye-yeah!" with the serious mood still hanging over them, the Sniper dispensed with his usual fabrications. Well, most of them.

"I-I'm Ussop from Syrup Village. I like being a sniper, making up new stories, being seen as a brave hero, and being a pirate. And I like Miss. Kya a lot too. I dislike those who pick on weaklings or call people liars. A-a-and I really don't like villainous pirates. My hobbies are inventing new sling-shot stars like my own exploding stars and new flame stars. I'm also pretty good at painting or other odd jobs. And my Dream is to become a Fierce, Brave Warrior of the Seas.

"That sounds really cool!" Naruto responded. While Sakura took a breath, mentally preparing to go last.

"Um....My name is Haruno Sakura. I like my teammates, especially Sasuke, and working at the Baratie. I dislike being so far away from home, people being disappointed in me, and..." a guilty mood settled over the girl.

"And I dislike how I used to treat my teammates Naruto and Sasuke. Until Kakashi-sensei straightened me out. My hobbies are trivia

games and reading books to learn more about the rest of this-the, about the world. And my dream is to get back home to my village..... to my friends. And hopefully have a family of my own, someday"

While unremarkable to the Straw Hats, Team 7 were baffled by Sakura's response. Particularly their sensei.

'Well, it appears to be Sakura's turn to have grown the most out of all my students. She's not acting like a love-obsessed fan-girl and was honest about herself to everyone. Guilt really can be a strong influence... don't I know it?' His thoughts closed on that sad notion.

"Right," Luffy spoke up. "Now I need to go get Sanji. He's gotta do this too since he's part of this crew too."

"I am not joining your crew! Can't you get that!" Sanji's voice rang out from a balcony of the restaurant.

"Huh? Um, Zoro? What's that!" Sasuke spoke apprehensively. Everyone glanced at the boy, holding one hand outstretched towards a looming silhouette in the fog. It was massive, twice the size of the Baratie. And moving closer.

Zoro's eyes narrowed....

Ussop, Nami and Sakura looked on curiously. While Luffy and Kakashi remained nonchalant.

"Miss Nami. Isn't that a ship called a galleon?" Sakura ventured.

The navigator and the swordsman blinked in shock. ".....That's right, Sakura. Good job."

"I read it in a book Chef Zeff loaned me. They used to be called 'floating fortresses,' primarily meant for military might or transporting treasure. With thick hulls, and more than 4 decks below, mostly storage rooms and over a hundred cannons. They were powerful but

heavy and very slow." The girl recalled as the looming threat continued approaching.

"Guys! Don't panic but I think this is our cue to leave right noooowww!" Usopp cried in terror.

"Hourglasses." Sasuke voiced, his Sharingans trained on the boat. "There's a pair of hourglasses on a flag. With a skull and crossbones."

"What! But-but-but that's Don Krieg's Flag! He's one of the most powerful pirates in all the East Blue!" Nami cried in shock.

At those words, most of the crew grew serious, while Ussop and Nami were afraid.

"Team 7, Zoro. Let's move inside and let Zeff know. Nami, Ussop, Luffy, you guys should stay with the Merry." Kakashi suggested.

"Nope," Luffy answered. "If there's danger, then the captain has to face it head-on before any of his crew. Besides, they said Gin was part of that pirate crew. Maybe he came back to repay Sanji and Naruto for their kindness."

Many people disagreed. Kakashi shrugged at Luffy's answer and moved back to the restaurant with his students, Zoro and Luffy. While Ussop and Nami stayed with the Merry. Once inside, they and the cooks waited in silence. A pair of footfalls echoed from the decks, joined by a looming silhouette in the windows. Growing closer... louder....bolder....

Kakashi glanced around at the diners, noticing Johnny and Yosaku nearby sharing grim looks. "Hey there. Outside, Nami mentioned that the ship has the flag of someone named Krieg. You two know anything about this pirate crew?"

"Uh. Y-y-ya big-bro Kakashi. It's the ship of Dirty-trick Commodore Don Krieg," Johnny replied. "He started his pirate career by

murdering a Marine officer and taking their ship. The guy is known for his pretty nasty tricks, like flying a Marine flag to get into a port and then tearing the place apart. Or giving a white flag before stabbing someone in the back."

"Yeah. Even Johnny and me might lose again him. We'd just lose, though, by a thin margin and after a great effort." Yosaku chimed in.

Kakashi nodded, while the footsteps paused.

The front doors were thrown open by two figures.

"Gin!" Naruto cried in surprise. The Man-Demon stood in the doorway, holding up another figure, dressed in a yellow shirt with black patterns and a purple cloak with fur lining. The man wore a gaunt expression. His figure was barely sustained by Gin, who was pleading with the cooks.

"Please, s-save him. My captain, he's close to starving and has been for weeks. We got money to pay this time, Ah swear it, both him and our remaining crew. Well... wh-what's left of us anyway..."

"No way!" Patty exclaimed. "Yeah," Carne joined in. "If we helped him he'd just turn around and slaughter us. This man is known as the most treacherous of all pirates, the ruler of the East Blue. Plus he's unmatched in physical combat, there's no way he'd just leave us alone."

While he spoke, the very cutthroat in question sunk to his knees, begging for food and care. "I promise. I won't attack this restaurant. Just give me food."

"Don, not! Gin cried. "This is unbecoming of you."

Meanwhile, the Genin eyed the pair carefully from behind their sensei. Sakura strained to keep her fear in check, recognizing him from the Wanted posters earlier. Naruto frowned, his arms crossed over his chest. 'Hmm. A dirty cheater like this guy definitely doesn't

deserve food. He's just faking it then he'd jump us easily. I'm not falling for his fake sorry.' While Sasuke sneered at the bandaged, side-burn-sporting captain. 'This man has no pride at all. Lowering his head to beg so easily is nothing a true leader would do.'

Eventually, Sanji stepped forward, carrying a hot meal towards the Pirate commodore. Patty was thrown aside, while Kakashi and Zeff just looked on.

"Sanji-sensei! What are you doing! This guy's nothing like Gin, and he's definitely lying about that promise! He should just be thrown out." Naruto cried in dismay.

Sanji didn't respond, just lying the food within reach of the pirate, who began shovelling handfuls into his mouth.

"C-Captain Luffy. Do you really want someone who helps villains like that man to join your crew? And if he does attack us, can you and Kakashi-sensei beat him?" Sakura asked.

Luffy looked on. "I don't like him, but I don't like seeing people go hungry either. But if he wants to fight later." The teenage man gripped his Straw-Hat. "Then I'll just kick his butt, and anyone else with him, no problem."

Glancing back to the scene, Sakura watched as the cooks berated Sanji for giving food to the criminal, while Zeff had disappeared and Kakashi stood calm, nearly uninterested in their company.

"Sanji-san/Sanji-sensei!" she and Naruto cried. The cook was sent flying until he landed on a table, stuck by the Don.

"Don Krieg!" Gin shouted. "Why'd you an' do dat?! He saved my life, and yours. I only brought you here because you'd promised not to attack!"

"Hmm. The food was delicious." Krieg spoke up. Ignoring his subordinate and glancing around the ship, greedily. The patrons fled

through the back doors, leaving only the cooks, Johnny, Yosaku, Luffy, Zoro, and Team 7 inside. "This is a pretty nice ship. I think I'll take it."

"No way! If you try to do that, we'll kick your butt. Believe it!" Naruto challenged, angry as a bull with steam pouring from his nose.

"Don Krieg!" Gin pleaded. "Please!" But his words were ignored. Sanji, Naruto. I'm sorry. I-I don't mean for th-this to happen."

"I have about a hundred men on my ship, all weak with hunger. Feed them and leave," the Don commanded. "and I'll leave you alive."

Now Naruto was fuming, at Gin for seemingly betraying their kindness and being ignored by the Don.. "Ya know, I changed my mind!" Pulling a kunai from his hip-pouch, the blonde started running at Krieg. "I'll kick both your asses!"

Now, Krieg noticed the boy, and pulled a single pistol from his coat, as Naruto was barreling forward stupidly. Kakashi was torn, to go for his student or the Pirate. Before he noticed Luffy.

With a solid echo, two figures fell to the ground, while the pistol clattered aside.

"Naruto. A ninja does not charge in recklessly," Kakashi scolded him, after knocking Krieg back with a solid kick. The blonde was at the feet of the Jonin after Luffy knocked him in the head with a light, extendable punch.

"Ooowwwww. Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow. Sensei, you heard what he said. I was just gonna-"

"Get yourself killed." Zoro admonished, while Naruto was nursing his swollen head. "Next time, throw the knife instead of just running in like that, little brat. You wanna put a dent in someone, fight smart, not stupid."

"Yeah, just stand right there Naruto. We'll blast this guy apart!" Patty declared, holding a lobster-shaped cannon. While Krieg smirked condescendingly at those assembled, eying Kakashi shrewdly.

"Here." Zeff entered the scene, with a large sack slung over his shoulder. Walking forward like a one-legged Santa Clause, he dropped it beside Kakashi, then crossed his arms. "That's about a hundred meals for your men."

"HEAD CHEF ZEFF!" 90% of those assembled exclaimed. "What!? Wh-why are you helping those criminals, Head Chef!" Sakuae cried in confusion.

"Um, are you sure that's smart?" Sasuke inquired.

"Hold it! You!" Krieg gasped in awe. "You're Red Foot Zeff, aren't you!? The unrivalled captain who was also the ship's cook. So you are alive."

"Yes, I am," the chef acknowledged. "I lost a leg, but I can still cook."

"Give me your logbook," Krieg demanded. "The Grand Line-AH!"

The Con-Don was cut off by a knife at his throat. Following it, the pirate met the narrow eye of a single, grey-haired man. "Sorry, but I doubt he will do that. And even more so, I won't allow it. You know of it, as any captain would. But such a tome is a sacred treasure to him, as a reminder of the comrades, the friends, he had once before their untimely deaths."

"I will not allow you to steal it from him," the Jonin released his killing intent at the Pirate, causing Krieg to hesitate, then call out. "Gin!" Quickly, a pair of tonfa struck Kakashi and launched away from the Don.

"Hey, nice work Gin. Took you long enough to defend your captain." Krieg declared, recovering his bravado.

"Yes, Don." The Man-Demon nodded, twirling the weapon in his hand. While his superior hefted the sack of food over his shoulder.

"Now, like I said. That Logbook is exactly what I need to conquer the-"

"Gum-gum: Bazooka!"

The Don was cut off, hit square in the face by a pair of arms. Sending the man flying head-over-heels through the open doorway, back to his wreck of a ship.

The remaining people turned to Luffy and the pair of fresh holes in the wall where his arms stretched back. The Captain didn't care, facing the direction he'd sent Krieg flying.

"The only one who will be King of the Pirates is me. He nearly hurt my nakama Naruto and did order one of his guys to hurt Kakashi. Men, get ready for a fight!"

End.

[1]- Naruto S-class missions often start at 1,000,000 ryo in-universe.

Defeat and Division

Chapter 8: Defeat and Division:

Failure is Inspirational.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

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Outdoors, unaware of what was transpiring inside the Baratie, Usopp and Nami examined the massive galleon, unimpressed. "How could anyone even steer such a wreck," the navigator remarked. "That ship is literally falling apart. Like a storm or something else caused lacerations in the haul and sails."

"You're right about that," Usopp agreed. "It was powerful once upon a time, but now it's resembling an overused chew toy. I bet anyone with a canon can sink it, no problem."

"Whatever." With that shrug, Nami heard a new commotion coming from the decrepit ship. But she ignored it, curling one hand into a fist. 'Arlong... how could I forget? I have to get back home,' she mused. 'With the loot here, I'm so close. Only problem. How am I going to sneak off if the ninjas can just run after me? I'll have to wait for a fight or something-'

A loud clap exploded, resembling wood torn apart. Looking away from the dying ship, both witnessed the figure of Don Krieg and a large sack flying out from the restaurant. The blowhard hit the

figurehead of his own ship, ripping it to splinters then crashed against the foremast.

Inside the floating restaurant, the cooks looked on, their mouths agape at the massive hole where the front doors used to be. "Hey, old man!" Luffy called over his shoulder at Zeff, after sending Krieg flying. "If my crew fight these guys and win. Can we take Sanji with us?"

"I'm not joining your crew!" the chef yelled. With a tick on his forehead.

"I already said that he's yours, didn't I?" Zeff merely barked. "He's a horrible cook and a festering thorn in my good leg. And I know that little brat Naruto would love to have him along. Stick around for a fight, that's up to you. But I might actually pay you to drag Sanji off after," Zeff declared.

Before the chef and his sous-chef could erupt into another argument, Kakashi coughed for their attention. "Well, Luffy's aspirations and our agreement aside, Chef Zeff hasn't given formal approval for us ninjas to leave."

"At least, not as of yet," the Jonin shrugged. "Meaning I'm still in charge of stopping any fights from damaging this restaurant."

"If you don't mind, Captain, we... can't really leave the chef with Krieg loitering on his doorstep. Plus, later on, you and I will have a talk about hurting my students," the Jonin motioned to the lump on Naruto's head, where Luffy had punched him into the ground.

Luffy nodded with a simple, "Okay. This place looks important to Sanji, too." Besides," Luffy's knuckles smacked into one palm, and a wide grin on his face. "I've been eating so good here, it's left me itching for a fight. And if that Kreek likes he's gonna big King of the Pirates, he and me gotta fight."

Kakashi grinned as the sous-chef complained, again, and Zoro merely smirked.

"Sakura," Kakashi hissed. "Get back to Usopp and Nami. They should move the Going Merry away from this fight, or Krieg might just attack them to get his hands on another ship."

"Yes, sensei!" the girl dashed from the room. While Sasuke and Zoro stepped forwards beside Luffy and the other cooks began arming themselves for a fight."

"Hey boss! Why did you even give that guy any food at all?" Carne complained.

"Yeah, that guy was no different than Gato!" Naruto cried. "A liar and villain who just likes power and killing people! Why did you help him like that!?"

Even Sasuke agreed with Naruto, frowning towards Zeff. More complaints followed until the Head Chef stomped his peg leg, shutting them up.

"I don't wanna hear any complaints or accusations," Zeff placidly commanded. "Everyone on this boat did what they thought was right. Whether it was smart or not, that's a different story," the chef glared straight at Naruto.

"Why?" Sasuke spoke up. "Giving that food to those pirates just made them stronger. Holding on to it and keeping them weak would have been a better way to deal with them."

"I'm going to agree with Sasuke here," Kakashi chimed in. "Why did you give those meals to Don Krieg knowing that it would lead to a fight?"

"Yeah Boss!" Patty jumped in, emboldened by the ninjas. "I bet you were just covering for Sanji again. You always take his side about feeding anyone to come in, but they're often criminals who just give

us trouble. And now they'll probably try and kill us all or wreck the whole restaurant!"

"YOU FOOLS DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT!"

This time, Zeff's exploded and everybody present was cowed. Everyone except Kakakashi and Luffy; the rest were silenced by terror.

"None of you have any idea," Zeff continued, softer and yet with more weight in his tone, "of what it's like to be on the brink of starvation. To have no food or water on the open ocean. There is no way you can possibly understand what a terrifying prospect that is. It's the most difficult situation a man can ever face."

Softly, a tremor passed through Naruto's body. Joined by the boy's hand crossing over his stomach at the phantom memory. "The difference between all of you and Sanji," Zeff continued. "Is that Sanji knows...."

In a corner, the blonde cook wasn't even looking up as he lit a fresh cigarette. Some looked on in confusion, while Kakashi leaned back, his body lazy yet his mind sharp with this news. 'So... that's why they feed anyone. And Naruto...'

The Jonin hadn't missed a few tears trickling down Naruto's cheeks. The whiskered Uzumaki was thinking back; his mind travelling to the memories of lying on his bed, stomach grumbling, isolated and alone.

He knew what it was to go hungry. Of lying around wishing for some kind of food and comfort, without any family or care. Or to look for something he'd loved, but only to find glares and denial everywhere but one, safe haven.

"Listen up," Sanji called out, rising to his feet with a fresh cigarette. He strode across the room, facing Gin. "I'm only gonna say this once. Feeding someone who's hungry is my sacred, moral duty. But-!" He kicked the legs of a table, righting it up then took a seat.

"Now that your crew is well-fed, I have no obligation to them. With a clear consciousness, I can beat every last one of them to a bloody pulp. If anyone tries to take the restaurant... They're dead." Sanji promised. "I'll kill them without a moment's hesitation."

Naruto had stars dancing in his eyes, while the rest of the cooks erupted with cheers. Kakashi and Zeff looked towards the coming fight, but Sasuke was frowning in confusion over Sanji's choices.

"Don't think over it too much, kid," Zoro spoke up beside the Uchiha. "Focus on this coming fight, because it looks like we have a damn lot of guys to cut apart." The swordsman wore the face of a hungry wolf.

"Hey Gin," Luffy spoke up. "Have you been to the Grand Line? You didn't say anything about it last time you were here."

The Man-Demon looked up, with terror in his sunken eyes. "I don't know anything anymore. We followed Don Krieg's command, all 5,000 men of us, to that cursed sea. But on the 7th day... Ah don't know if it were a dream... or reality. Ah saw things, things Ah can't believe... it was fine sailing. All the way to the seventh day, then..."

"Then all 50 of our ships, we were decimated by one single man," Gin spoke as if he was in a daze, recalling a vague nightmare, even while most of his audience stirred at the tale. Even Luffy and Usopp had their mouths open.

"Outa those we set out with, so few are even left," Gin continued, "One by one, no mattah how many, or what we tried. He just, came upon us, in a vessel too small to even be a ship. And obliterated everythin' in his sight."

Sanji was tense. He felt the truth in Gin's words, from a silent background of living with political deceit and half-truths. This story left him with fear.

"Really?" a calm, disbelieving voice called. "I, may not have set foot there, myself," Kakashi enquired, his voice heavy with scepticism.

"But 5,000 men, defeated by a single person seems quite far-fetched."

"Call me a liar, if ya want." Gin's broken voice cracked, holding a trembling hand to his face. "It really happened. His eyes... I'll never forget those eyes." Dropping all sense of pride, the broken man cradled his face, disbelief and terrified awe ringing from him.

"As soon as this man appeared," Gin brokenly recounted, "he began to systematically sink our ships, one after another. A raging storm came upon us, separating our flagship from him, or else there ain't no way we'd escape from that monster. I can still feel his murderous gaze like the cold hand of death. His eyes were like a hawk's. Sharp and murderous. His gaze alone felt like the cold hand of death."

The Cooks were filled with amazement. Naruto and Luffy gaped at the news, while Sasuke.....

Gin's recount left Sasuke as rigid as a statue. His mind was filled with a separate memory, recalling another figure infamous for their eyes. The talk of this new figure's skill, his monstrous skill, and his terrifying gaze....

Sasuke didn't notice Zoro quivering with exhilaration; his hand tightening on the hilt of Wado Ichimoji, grasping every word Gin spoke.

'Those words.....can it really be....

Kakashi frowned, slightly. "Are you certain about that? One man defeating five thousand alone would be a powerful feat, but even on our home, no single person can accomplish that within only a day. Even the best shinobi in our village, the Yondaime Hokage, was renowned for killing one thousand single-handedly with his sheer speed and intellect. 5,000 is a tall-" A solid impact banged through the room.

"Kakashi!" The Jonin eyed Zeff, as the chef's foot was planted over the table he'd been sitting at; a broken table, now. "Damn it, he dodged again! And worse you haven't paid attention to a single thing I've told you." Zeff leered, with a stern reproach burning in his eyes.

"Gin's telling you nothing but the truth, and you're stupidity in disbelieving it stands out. The people who live on the Grand Line are far and beyond anyone you've met in your own home," The chef was folding both arms over his chest, eyeing Kakashi shrewdly. "There, someone can either fail and die, survive for a while and pull themselves out, or take the third option. Develop their own taste for the danger, and thrive living so close to obliviation on the seas."

"There's no doubt that this man's story is true, just from the description of precisely who shattered the Krieg pirates so casually."

Glance back at the Man-Demon, Zeff shared a knowing look with the broken man. "Your description of his heartless gaze isn't proof of his identity in and of itself. But the ease you speak of that he decimated your fleet confirms without a doubt that it can only be him. His name is--"

"Hawk-eyes Mihawk...." Zoro hungrily declared. Now he had everyone's attention.

"So, you know him Zoro?" Luffy asked.

"Yeah, I do. "He's the man I've been looking for." Zoro got a grip on his excitement and leaned back, folding both arms. "Hawk-eyes is the whole reason I set out to sea."

"Hmmm. I should have known," Zeff stated. "Every swordsman knows that name, unless they've been living under a rock. The man currently known as the Greatest Swordsman in the World. And one of the Warlords of the Seas. But that ain't important right now."

"Everyone!" Zeff called to his kitchen staff. "Raise the fins and grab whatever weapons you'd like. If those men are stupid, and follow the

fool who led them into death, get ready to thrash back into the ocean!" Everyone roared in approval, with Patty brandishing a Lobster-shaped Bazooka. "Plus, we can have at least one good fight with the ninjas before they leave," Zeff was grinning at Naruto, who began dancing at the promise of a fight, with Luffy right beside him. Sasuke and Zoro were smirking, while Kakashi just toyed with the book sitting in his pouch, wishing he could re-read the next chapter instead of following his conscious.

Soon the fins outside the restaurant were raised, everyone was armed and ready. Watching for signs of Don Krieg while the sounds of hungry men filled the air.

"Kakashi-sensei!" The Straw hats assembled turned, to find that Sakura had returned. "The Merry is alright," she updated them. "I gave Ussop and Nami your idea to sail the boat to a safe distance from the fight. They're now over a kilometre away."

"Well done, Sakura," Kakashi nodded to her. "Alright Team 7, Captain Luffy!" all of the Genin faced their Jonin-sensei, while Luffy glanced over curiously. "How do you want us to engage these pirates?"

"Engage?" Luffy cocked his head sideways. "What does that mean? We gotta fight, so fight," Luffy cracked his knuckles, grinning. "Do what you do, I'll do what I do, and don't die."

"Whoooo, yeah," one of the ninjas cried with glee, while the others almost hiccuped at the answer. "Don't overthink too much," From one side, Zoro had drawn one sword, his other hand resting on another. "I cut, Luffy punches, you guys do your own thing, and we back-up one another."

"Ahhhh," Kakashi was fighting an itch to smack his forehead into his palm, while him beside Sakura did exactly that; on the brink of a fight.

"I, have a small plan in mind, if you wouldn't mind hearing it," the Jonin offered.

Luffy just shrugged. "Okay."

"Hey, you tiny brat!" a voice challenged from the wrecked masthead. Standing there was Krieg, with a look of indignant fury on his face, and golden armour clear to see. "You are honestly stupid enough to challenge Don Krieg?! My crew may have taken a few losses recently, but we're still over a hundred strong. You have what? Five people with you, and half of them useless, stupid runts? Is that honestly the best you could scrape from a barrel to call a pirate crew?"

"Hey, I'm not stupid or a runt, believe it!" Somebody ran forward, tense against the insults he'd just heard.

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki. And for hitting Sanji-sensei and trying to hurt this restaurant, I gotta kick your ass!" Naruto challenged him. Then he dashed out towards Krieg to deliver that promise.

Until Luffy's arm shot out, snagging the thoughtless knucklehead and him running in place, with both fists swinging wildly. "No," Luffy was staring up at Don Krieg, answering him. "There are four more in my crew!"

"I'm not joining your crew!" Sanji cried.

"And I picked all of them personally," Luffy proclaimed, tarring without care up at the fuming blow-hard. "You might have more men, but I can beat up all of them and you, no problem. And you ain't that bigger all from the other guys I met already." Luffy spoke, plain and simple.

Kakashi cocked an eyebrow at his tone, while Zeff grinned. 'That's no loud bravado or a hollow claim,' the Chef mused silently. 'This kid does hold some real grit.'

"WHAAATT!" Don Krieg's incredulous shout rang out. "Somebody as tiny, stupid, small as you. Think they think you can stand before Don Krieg!"

"Yup," Luffy answered in a plain voice. "I've got full faith in my crew and these cooks. You're in for a big beatdown" Then he cracked his knuckles together, while the man in golden armour stamped his foot, hard. "WHAT INSOLENT STUPIDITY!" Krieg replied. "YOU'RE JUST ASKING TO GET YOURSELF KILLED! MY CREW WILL SHOW YOU THE REAL STRENGTH OF THE NEXT PIRATE KING! THE MIGHT OF THE STRONGEST MAN IN ALL THE WORLD![1] MEN! ATTACK!"

With a chorus of confidence, 2 dozen men leapt up beside the Don, weapon out and eager for plunder

"Naruto, clones! Form a wall between us and the cooks from those pirates," Kakashi ordered him. "Sakura, Sasuke, use kunai, shuriken and fire-jutsu if you see an opening. Zoro, Luffy, let's wait back for now, or hit from behind Naruto's clones. This is just the first wave, not the real attack just yet."

Everyone nodded, while the Pirates brought forward 5 gangplanks, setting one end on the railings of their ship as the rest drew pistols, cutlasses and other weapons.

"Hey, Doon Krieg!" Luffy called, while cocking one arm back, and glaring up at the man staring over them

"Gum-gum: Rifle!" As Luffy's fist flew, all the enemies watching him froze. The punch nailed Don Krieg straight in the face. "Don!" All his crew exclaimed, as the Pirate Admiral got thrown head-over-heels... again.

"Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Clouds of smoke came erupting over the fins until 3 dozen Naruto stood tall, surprising the Krieg Pirates again. "Devil-fruit powers!" Gin cried.

"So that one is just a lucky brat who found a strange power by coincidence," a new, disdainful voice observed. Standing by the prow was a large, round man with black, greasy hair slicked back from his brow. He wore massive stone plates, surrounding oversized pearls, and matching earrings. "Still, nothing that is as soft as rubber can get through my defense," the new face drawled. "Men, use your guns to shoot at the cooks, while the others charge down on those gangplanks. I will join you should it prove necessary." Rapidly, the regular pirates lowered their gangplanks to the Baratie fins and Naruto's clones advanced.

"Captain, Genin! Target those ramps while they're all clustered together, but don't hit Naruto's clones!" Kakashi ordered. Sakura, Kakashi and Sasuke used their kunai and shuriken to wound or kill most of the pirates as they charged down, while Luffy jumped high above them. "Shot him!" the new officer ordered in response.

"Pearl no, tha' may be rubber. It'll just-" Gin cried out, in futility. The snipers trained their guns on Luffy as their fellow men began a melee with Naruto's clones. Only 1/2 the bullets reached Luffy, creating several protrusions in his back. The cooks came surging forward to meet the rogues engaging a wall of Naruto's and Luffy made a smile. "Why'd you have these, BACK!" Flexing his body, Luffy sent the bullets in a shower over the enemies below, tearing through the pirate ranks. Then he spun around, stretching out his leg skywards. "Gum-gum: battle-axe!" The limb came crashing down, slamming two gangplanks to pieces, and causing more rouges to end up overboard in the watery space below them.

"Hahahaha," Naruto was mocking them. "You guys are way too easy. Get outa here and back where ya came from. Come on!"

"Naruto, no!" but it came too late. The clones all rushed forward, launching kicks at the enemy pirates, showing the results of Sanji's training. Naruto grinned, basking in his success before- a searing pain came in the real one's forearm. Crying in pain, Naruto stopped short, curling into a ball and clutching the limb close to his chest. And with more pirates still around him.

Sakura, Sasuke, Sanji, Zoro and Kakashi came in a rash, driven to cover their crewmate but one of them stopped before she could get stuck in with them. Sakura held a kunai tightly, her body and mind split and confused. The girl had never fought like this before and was torn between deep, natural fear and training accumulated not very long ago. Everywhere she looked, violence and chaos filled her eyes, chaos dominated her ears, and the fresh Genin became aimless.

"Die, you tiny bitch!" whirling at the threat Sakura found a large, ugly man barreling for her with a sword. Her eyes widened, throwing her kunai up with both hands to block it. The weapon crashed down, forcing the knife out of her grip, nearly taking a finger with it, and forced Sakura onto her butt, dazed and helpless to the man's killing thrust.

"Get away from my Nakama!" One hand seized the ugly man's shoulder, and Luffy collided with the man head-to-head. Rising to his feet, with the mook out cold, the young captain glanced for Sakura. "You okay?" She nodded, so Luffy turned away and got back to knocking down more pirates, driving them away from the fallen girl.

Zoro joined, and quickly the first wave was either killed, writhing in pain, swimming, or knocked out. While Sanji tore through everyone surrounding Naruto like a tornado.

"You idiotic, rubbery bastard!" Krieg had returned to his place, with a large bruise on his cheek. "You, actually have stupid faith in all of your crew? Once that orange idiot dashed forward," Krieg voiced aloud, "there were more holes for my men to get through than Swiss cheese. He nearly ran forward to his death from my men swarming him and cutting down those copies from behind. And that little girl was utterly helpless, completely pathetic. The fact that you saved such a useless crewmate instead of just using her as cannon fodder proves you're an idiot!"

Sakura's eyes widened at those words, while Naruto growled at the Don despite nursing a jagged gash in his forearm. But. "You're right,"

Luffy agreed. That made everyone stop, turning to their captain with confusion and betrayal; none more so than Sakura, who began feeling hollow and terrible.

"Naruto was pretty stupid, but I've done that too before," Luffy continued. "And Sakura ain't a real fighter, and she's the weakest outa us."

"You've got that right, Captain," Zoro agreed. "She doesn't train like the other brats do."

"But, she's part of my crew," Luffy affirmed. "She's one of my nakama, and so long as that's true, I'll do more fighting and protect her." Luffy pledged.

"Captain, I..." Sakura gulped past a lump in her throat. "I'm sorry."

"Why do that?" Luffy asked, turning away from Don Krieg, and staring down at his crewmate. "It's too long since I got a fight last, so that just means more bozos for me to punch, shishishishishishi."

The Don glared at his latest enemy while Luffy merely kept grinned with anticipation and confidence Until-

Everything went to hell. Beneath his feet, and those of the rest of what remained of his "fleet," Don Krieg's ship split apart.

Out of nowhere, everything was slipping apart, shifting. For a moment it stayed somewhere standing, then split into fractions.

Kakashi and his students could only gape as the ship seemed to float in the air, then it collapsed. "Naruto's" All the copies with that name turned at Kakashi's call. "Grab everyone and grip the deck with chakra, let nobody fall overboard." Nodding, the gaggle of orange dashed in each direction.

The air was filled with screams and awe or warnings of falling debris. What was left of three masts hit the water, throwing up fresh waves

and curtains of seawater sprayed everywhere. Naruto fumbled at Kakashi's orders, but he accomplished the command and held tightly to everyone while Sasuke seized Zoro and Sakura held Luffy. The Baratie kept rocking by the waves from the ship cut to fractions.

Kakashi had unveiled his right eye, scanning the space for a source of the chaos. 'H....h... how? Had that break been from accumulated damage, there would have been some indication or warning,' he reasoned. 'But nothing came. I didn't sense any chakra, nor did any sounds come from the Galleon to suggest someone else was nearby!' Kakashi was shaken. He had never seen anyone other than a Kage-class Shinobi, a Summoning creature or a Bijū perform similar acts.

"No....no....It's... happen' again." Gin muttered, with traumatic shock. His legs gave out, turning his head to face the direction they'd sailed from, with dread.

"Wh-what just happened?!" Sasuke asked in shock. "It was cut apart," Zoro murmured. The man's heart was racing with thrill, pounding in his ears at one possibility. Johnny and Yosaku gawked before nodding in agreement. While the others could only continue wallowing in shock at the three of them. "What!" "No way!" "Impossible!" "How could anything cut something that huge!"

"A swordsman," Zoro murmured, reverently. "Those parts. They're cut almost clean through, flawlessly. Only a swordsman could have done that. Two cuts... that's it took. Is it... him....."

At his words, Kakashi's eye turned back to the wreckage, as Sasuke with his own set of Sharingan. True enough, the fragments were separated cleanly through, with no jagged or ripped fragments. Onboard the destroyed ship, men in tattered clothes tumbled around or clung to the ship. "No, it can't be. He followed us!" Don Krieg screamed. "I don't remember doing anything to him! This is unnecessary and excessive!"

Nobody could spare a thought for the dramatic hypocrisy. Not as a figure in a large coffin-shaped boat slipped through the gaps in the ship.

"Phew. That out to be far away enough, you agree Nami? Nami?"
Usopp remarked, after slumping down from their scramble to move the Going Merry away from the battle.

"Oh, Usopp" the girl turned around. "The heat today and the scramble to move our ship left me all sweaty and hot." She was pulling at her shirt, with the collar opening to reveal a sliver of one mound. "I'm just gonna change into something more comfortable. A true private and a brave warrior wouldn't peek at their nakama would they?" she sweetly praised him, with a strawberry-red face holding a shy grin.

The sniper's eyes widened, before jolting straighter than a metal pole, and whirling out to face the sea. "Uh-ye-yeah. Yeah that's right! No brave, chivalrous warrior would dare commit such actions. Heh, luck for you it's just me here and not Zoro or Kakashi. Naruto and the others are probably too young and innocent to even know about peeping-Toms. So what are you-AHHHHH!"

Mid-sentence, something forced Usopp forward, over the railing and he landed in the sea.

"Shishishishishi. I would've drowned. Thanks for saving me, Sakura." Luffy kept grinning at the girl, with one hand holding tight to his shirt after the rubber man nearly fell overboard. Both barely noticed the new arrival cruising through the waters near the freshly destroyed ship.

He wore a broad, dark hat that covered the man's face, crimson and black clothing, with a bare chest and one massive cross over his back. Sasuke himself took in all these details, yet once the figure lifted their head...

the cold grasp of death seized him. 'What is this feeling?... It's like Zabuza's killing intent... but so much stronger... and this man... he-he's so at ease.....' The Uchiha brokenly thought, until his eyes were locked with Mihawk's. One eye with two tomoe, the other only one, and transfixed on the golden eyes with dread.

Sasuke wasn't alone, as Sakura was petrified, collapsing to the deck under a powerful gaze. Sharp pupils, surrounded by sharp yellow irises, were piercing her soul. Her lungs were burning, the paralyzing fear even leaving her unable to breathe.

"Hey, you! You monster! Why did you follow us all the way here?" One of Don Krieg's men called out. Finally, the swordsman shifted his gaze. Yet their impact lingered in the Genin's mind; before Sasuke gasped for air, clutching his chest in pain and trepidation.

Kakashi noted, eying him carefully.' 'A long coat, patterns sleeves and light purple, baggy pants. And sporting a sharply styled moustache and beard. What form of style or function is this meant to be?'

"You... you followed us here. Why, what did we ever do to cross you!?" a member of Krieg's pirate crew asked.

"Nothing. Just killing time," the figure replied, nonchalantly. Making the Leaf ninjas gape at him.

'He seriously wrecked that galleon, and decimated an entire fleet, just on a casual whim? That's either impressive or disappointingly petty.' Kakashi thought.

"You bastard!" one enemy Pirate fired two pistols at Hawkeyes. Within the span of a blink, Hawkeye's hand grasped a Giant Black sword and angled its tip at the Krieg pirate. Naruto and Sakura couldn't see what happened, but Sasuke and Kakashi did. 'Wh... he....he didn't even look at.....only my Sharingan could follow those bullets... but he deflected them.' Sasuke was amazed, following the

bullets as the tip of the massive swords deflected them. 'Is this man, that fast!?!...'

"Hey, who do you think you are!" "Holy Shit! He has Three Swords! It couldn't be!" "That's Roronoa Zoro!" Such as announcements became a welcome distraction, breaking the spell most of the audience was under and looking somewhere else.

Zoro strode forward, to the edge of where the fight against the Krieg pirates had been raging moments before. "I've never seen a sword handled so gently," Zoro complemented, with an edge in his tone. "Or with such grace!" The rest of the cooks, pirates, and ninjas watched as the two exchanged words. Luffy and Sasuke the most animated among them.

"I set sail for only one reason. To find you!" Zoro was now tying a bandana around his head. "And what is your goal?" Hawkeyes replied, his hands casually folded.

"To beat you!" Zoro declared. Hawkeyes smirked, condescendingly. "How foolish."

A soft thump. Sasuke felt the exchange strike a chord in his consciousness. The man's words echoed in Sasuke's ears, "'How foolish'... how foolish... how foolish," drawing him to feel deep anger. His hands curled into shaky fists, teeth grinding together. As Zoro drew his swords, and Hawkeyes hopped aboard the galleon wreckage, Sasuke didn't even blink.....eager and hesitant to see the results of this encounter.

Words continued to be traded between Zoro and Hawkeye. And each syllable continued echoing in Sasuke's head.

'a foolish creature'.... 'the disparity between us is clear'... 'is it because of courage, or ignorance'..... 'I made a promise I intend to keep'...

"Shut up! He will defeat you!" Sasuke's voice cut between Hawkeye and Zoro's confrontation. "Zoro, you have to defeat him and fulfil your goal!"

Everyone turned to face Sasuke, none more surprised than Kakashi. Zoro eyed his young training partner but kept Hawkeyes in his peripheral. "Heh. No worries there, Sasuke. I didn't expect to run into him this soon, but I will defeat him today, no question. Plus, I have to beat him for our captain."

Now the Santoyru swordsman faced Luffy, as did Hawkeyes and Don Krieg. "Luffy. You said it yourself. The King of the Pirates would need to have nothing less than the best as part of his crew to find the One Piece, right!"

The Straw Hat grinned, fiercely. "Uh-huh, that's right! I've got full confidence that you'll do good, Zoro!" Everyone sweat-dropped. 'What the heck is confidence?'

"There isn't anyone alive who can beat Big-bro Zoro!" Yosaku and Johnny cheered. "Yeah, you're gonna beat that weirdly-dressed guy, Zoro! Believe it!" Naruto joined them.

While Kakashi noticed Hawkeye's gaze lingering on Luffy's Hat. Yet he looked away from it. "You actually think it's that simple?" The greatest admonished them. "Regardless of your exploits here, the East Blue is by far the weakest of the Four Blues. Such attitudes like that will lead you head-long into your own defeats elsewhere," he spoke, somewhat condescendingly.

While Sasuke blinked in surprise, just now realizing he had fallen to his knees. 'When did I fall? Why did I drop like this from that man?'

"Huh?!Umm... What's he doin' with that knife?" At Naruto's voice, Sasuke's attention returned to the fight. To see Hawkeyes holding a tiny dagger before Zoro's katana.

"This will be more than adequate," Mihawk established. "You wouldn't use a cannonball to kill a fly, now would you? This boy may have a reputation here in the East Blue. But that doesn't mean much to me." Hawkeye's voice was calm, despatched, and matter-of-fact. A plain, and simple fact, but it still left Zoro irked.

"I've had enough of your attitude!" He dashed forward! "Oni-Giri!"

In a blink, his blades were stopped, deadlocked. Neither opponent moved, but the Sharingans noticed Zoro's body straining against the tiny knife. Unable to press through it. While the owner of said knife was unbothered.

"What! Nothing's stopped Big-bro's Oni-Giri attacked!" Johnny shouted while Sasuke was sweating with disbelief. 'So fast! He barely moved as Zoro was bearing towards him, then the knife moved faster than a kunai right to the exact point when the blades crossed each other...'

After several moments, Zoro began a new attack. Each of his blades wildly slashing, in futility. It seemed little more than a toddler flailing about, led by the nose each time Hawkeyes moved. The looming figure of Hawkeyes untouched with only a small butter knife, deflecting each swing with an occasional sidestep.

A pause came, as Hawkeyes thrust forward, knocking Zoro back, falling head-over-heels. Once he got his feet back, Zoro was crouching low. "You can't be that much better than me!" Sasuke felt a growing hole in his stomach. A sinking fear tied in with the belief of whether Zoro would succeed or fail could be a premonition of his inevitable fight with Itachi Uchiha.

Zoro recovered his swords and began to attack. Darting forward with great balance and focus. Three swords cut through empty air, as Hawkeyes leapt overhead and landed gracefully behind him. Zoro spun around, following his enemy with cross-cuts and sweeps. Followed by an overhead cut that Mihawk easily blocked.

"Such ferocious swordplay," he commented before Zoro swung out with Wado in his mouth. A gust came forth where Mihawk blocked the unconventional attack, then he asked a question.

Kakashi followed every move, his respect for Zoro's enemy growing by the second.

"Zoro is a master swordsman, but this Hawkeyes is almost living perfection. His timing and speed are flawless, and even his strength is visibly greater than my green-haired comrade. Against Zabuz, I could barely hold off his Executioner's Blade with a kunai, and that weapon was designed to magnify the force of a blow it delivers. But this Mihawk can meet all of Zoro's swords strength-to-strength with a smaller weapon. His strength and speed empower his techniques and are perfected, to an edge thinner than hair. I've only seen such skill of sensei....'

'But one dangerous thing is extremely clear.' Kakashi grasped, with a stone building in his stomach.

The pair of swordsmen clashed, a green-haired novice against the Best alive. Mihawk is casual, balanced and effortless. Zoro's style, wild and unpredictable, looked to be an excessive waste by comparison. Zoro's strength and technique intensified, while Mihawk began to frown, slightly. Their eyes were opposites: one set narrow and focused, only seeing a common slight; the other wide and desperate, their vision filled by that one, tiny knife.

Out of the Blue-Zoro stumbled forward, as Hawkeyes gave him a solid neck-chop.

Kakashi nodded, seeing his premonition realized. 'Zoro's even more out-matched than any previous Genin hopefuls I had against me for the Bell test. Zoro can't win through skill, strength, speed other anything else in a direct confrontation. What will his response be?'

"Zoro!" "Multi-Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Hawkeye's eyes widened with surprise. Dozens of copies from a single person appeared. A few

even stood on the water, running over to him.

'Good Naruto, helping your new crewmate,' Kakashi smiled with pride.

"Yeah, we'll help you Big bro!" Drawing their weapons, Johnny and Yosaku launched forward.

"Hang on, we're coming to-!"

"Gum-Gum: Whip!"

Now everyone was shocked. Aside from watching a gaggle of orange shrimps running on the water, Luffy's leg shot back, extending to impossible lengths. With a pivot, it scythed across the battleground, hitting many different pirates and smashing the remains of the galleon. Every Naruto clone was hit, dissolving into smoke. While Kakashi snatched the real one, Johnny and Yosaku out of the way, and back to Luffy's side.

"Captain Luffy," Kakashi casually enquired, "Can you, Be a touch more, careful" his tone dipped to an icy level ", with that move? You almost sent my genin and these two, flying."

"Luffy! Hey, what're you doing Luffy" Naruto shouted at the Straw Hat. "Zoro's in trouble and he needs our help, ya know!"

"No, all of us, stay put!" Luffy commanded them, pinning Johnny and Yosaku down. "This is a fight Zoro wants to take himself. It's a challenge between men! None of us can do anything."

Kakashi frowned at the captain, while Naruto twisted out from his grip and was running out again. "If Zoro is outmatched-"

"Naruto!" Sasuke's voice rang out, as the Uchiha pinned his teammate to the ground just on the edge of the Baratie's deck. "Stay out of it!"

"Kakashi, Naruto!" Zoro separated from the others, and struggling to his feet, shouted at them. "Don't... either of you... dare do anything."

"I've driven myself," Zoro spoke, while his body was struggling to move, "towards this day all my life. This is a duel between swordsmen. If anybody intervenes then it would be a cowardly escape or a dishonourable forfeit. Johnny, Yosaku, you know that!" Both of his former partners looked ashamed. Then Zoro's eyes turned to Naruto and a grey-haired scarecrow, murderous and desperate.

"The only way to complete my ambition is to defeat Hawkeyes one-on-one, with my own skill. If you intervene in any fight between me and another swordsman, I will kill you both. He replied. Then took a new stance against Hawkeyes. "If I retreat, or if any of you step into this fight. Then you would take my honour from me. You see, without that, there would be nothing left for me here." Their fight resumed.

"Come on, that's just stupid!" Sakura cried. "You know you're outmatched, so just retreat and fight another day! Or wait until you're ready then look for him again. This is just stupid manly pride, with no logical-"

"Sakura!" a voice boomed, filled with disapproval. Zeff stomped his foot down.

"Pride may be stupid in hindsight. But in the end, it is often the only thing that can never be taken from someone. The only way someone can be without any pride is should they choose to give it up. Zoro was the one who challenged Mihawk. And for that matter, both men have striven their entire lives to own and uphold the ways of a swordsman."

The older man glared piercingly at the ignorant child. "Ridiculing or ignoring his struggle is the worst thing you can do here. And if anyone interferes then it would insult all the effort and sacrifices Zoro has made in pursuit of this dream. Show him and Mihawk the respect they deserve and encourage your crewmate to win."

Meanwhile, Zoro was panting, nearly exhausted. While Hawkeyes remained untouched and unperturbed. Slowly, the challenger took another step towards his opponent. Stumbling forward, an off-balance overhead slash was dodged, and Zoro tumbled over.

"What is it? What weight do you carry on your shoulders to challenge me?" Mihawk inquired.

"Speak up, weakling!"

"I won't lose. I refuse to be defeated," Zoro replied. He tried another attack: "Tiger Trap!"

It didn't even reach Mihawk until the man's dagger sunk into Zoro's chest. Puncturing his lung, just above the heart.

Zoro collapsed, while everyone that knew him shouted in worry. Everyone but Kakashi.

'That strike. It was a warning blow. Hawkeyes could have easily punctured Zoro's heart, ending his life right there. So now... what will happen?' The Jonin had never seen one man, so driven by their ambition, have such a deadly failure before. Each of his figures tingled, eager to execute any jutsu to aid the younger man. Struggling against his own principles to help Zoro and the truth behind Zeff's words.

While Mihawk whispered to Zoro. "You are defeated. Yet you won't step back. Why not?"

"I don't know," Zoro answered. "But what I do know. Is that if I retreat just a single step. Then I'll be shattering the promises I made."

"You said before that you would have nothing remaining should you lose your honour. Defeat is precisely what that is." Mihawk admonished him.

"Hhhh. Then I won't accept defeat," Zoro replied.

"Then you will die," Mihawk declared.

Zoro smirked. "I'd rather die than give up!"

Sasuke and Naruto both froze at his words. While Kakashi felt a pang from his memory at those words, of his left eye's original owner. And noticed a glint of respect in Mihawk's eyes.

The Greatest Swordsman withdrew his blade. Took three steps back, and sheathed the knife.

"Sir, state our name," respect clear in his tone.

Zoro stood tall, defying the logic of his wounds, and driving Kakashi's respect even higher.

"I am Roronoa Zoro."

"I'll remember it. No one as strong as you has come around for quite some time." Hawkeyes promised, as he reached back and drew the giant sword from his back.

"So as a Swordsman's courtesy. I will use the world's strongest black sword to finish you."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." Zoro nodded. His swords began to spin in his hands, while Mihawk crouched down.

"This is the last move of this duel," Kakashi murmured. While Sasuke's hand tensed in desperation. Everyone held their breath.

"Santoryu Ogi!: Sanzen Sekai" "Fauge!" The two swordsmen made a final clash together.

Crasgggggggg! Zoro sank to his knees, the swords in his hands cut to pieces and a long shallow cut over his chest.

"Zoro-san!" "Big-Bro Zoro!: Naruto, Johnny and Yosaku cried in fear. Sakura's hands flew to her mouth, and Sasuke gasped, with a look

of disbelief and defeat.

"That fool. Why?" Sanji whispered as he looked on.

Kakashi looked on.

'So... this is how powerful the best of this world can be. And that was unquestionably just a fraction of this his skills. This man may not have any chakra, but some form of compressed energy must have produced those airwaves that cut through the galleon. Zeff was right, I have underestimated just how dangerous this world can be....'

"Zoro!" Turning back to the fight, Kakashi looked on as Zoro stood tall, facing Mihawk to await the final blow.

"But why?"

Zoro grinned, his eyes carrying no fear. "Scars on the back are a swordsman's shame."

"Fine." With that, Zoro was cut down.

"Zoro!" Luffy Roared. Sasuke was no better, though his emotions were internalized, almost ripping him apart.

"You shouldn't rush these things, young man," Mihawk remarked.

"Don't be stupid! Give up your ambition and live!" Sanji's voice cut through them, as Zoro sank into the water.

Team 7 looked on, with the Genin each on their knees. Mihawk's words and this outmatched fight sunk into Sasuke's consciousness. Naruto look on, struggling to deny what he'd seen and how someone that dedicated could be completely outmatched. Sakura couldn't understand anything.

'Why... why give your life for such a distant goal, when the impossibility is so clear in front of him?' she thought. "It's just stupid and pointless. Sanji-san is right, and Zoro-san is just throwing his life

away for nothing. This is what would happen to Naruto from chasing his dream to be Hokage. At least Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke don't have that kind of stupid thoughts or goals.'

While Luffy- "Naruto, Kakashi! Zoro's fight's done. Now we can get this guy! Back me up!" His arm shot back, lifting one leg with his momentum. The arm shot out at Hawkeyes, to grab the deck. Then Luffy launched himself forward at Mihawk, while Naruto rushed forward, but sank under the water as distraction caused his chakra grip to fail.

"Basta-" Mihawk gracefully evaded Luffy, who went crashing into the hull of a wreck before he could finish speaking. Then the sound of birds chirping filled everyone's ears, nearly a thousand of them.

As Hawkeyes turned toward Luffy, he found a new figure blocking him. Wearing dark clothing and a padded vest, the man had wild grey hair and mismatched eyes. One trained on him, unblinkingly, with the promise of death.

Mihawk's eyebrows rose slightly at the man's eye, coloured an unnatural red with 3 tomoe surrounding its pupil.

Kakashi stood before Mihawk, crouched down with Chidori crackling in his hand. "Do not take another step. You may be the Best Swordsman alive, but touch one of my comrades, and you will not leave here alive," Kakashi threatened him.

Mihawk's eyes relaxed, his form uncaring and composed. "This duel is over, so I have no further business or interest in your crew. You care this much about that young warrior?"

Kakashi nodded at Mihawk's question, as Luffy became unstuck.

"I'm impressed at you both for not interfering further. And there is no reason for either of you to be upset. He will live."

Now Kakashi was surprised, but still held Chidori ready and did not entirely shift his attention off of Mihawk.

"Ghhhuuuuuuhhhhhh! Hey!" Usopp's voice came from the water. "Hey, somebody help me! I've got Zoro!" Sure enough, the cowardly sniper was holding on to his bloodied nakama, struggling to keep them both afloat. "He and Naruto just dropped into the water right in front of me covered in blood! What the heck happened here!"

"Zoro!" Luffy cried out. "Sasuke, Sakura, help him!"

Naruto broke the surface too and then climbed up to help Usopp. The other Genin ran out to meet them, hauling the wounded swordsman and an exhausted Usopp towards the Baratie.

"Usopp, why are you here and not on the ship? Where is Miss Nami!? Did something happen on the Merry?" Sakura asked once they arrived.

Usopp jerked, suddenly.

"Oh no! Nami, she stole the Merry! She-she pretended to be changing her shirt and asked me to give her some privacy. Then knocked me overboard by whacking the back of my head with her bo-staff. After that, she said something about not dying against Don Krieg like we wanted to and sailed off before I could climb aboard!"

Most of the crew were shocked. A moment passed, while a flicker of anger lit up in Kakashi's eye.

"It's still far too early for you to die!" Mihawk's voice rang out across the water. Calling their attention to him.

"My name is Hawkeye Mihawk. You're Strong, but there is much for you to learn. No matter how many years it takes. I will hold this title as the Greatest in the World. And wait for you. Until that day you must hone your skills. Then..."

"-Seek me out, Roronoa Zoro!"

Sakura looked up, bewildered by Mihawk's challenge to Zoro. Naruto was amazed. But Sasuke... could barely move. Every detail of the duel was forever etched into his memory: those words from Mihawk, Zoro's unwavering strength and commitment and Luffy's choices over the fight.

Kakashi was the most in awe, as he could comprehend the weight and meaning behind Mihawk's challenge, and the significance they would have to both swordsmen.

Then Mihawk turned to Luffy and Kakashi. "You, the captain. Roronoa stated your goal is to become the King of all Pirates. If that is the truth, what is the purpose you carry to see that goal fulfilled?"

Luffy looked up, unhesitant. "To fulfil a promise I made, to the guy who gave me this hat," he said, patting the Straw Hat on his brow.

Mihawk's eyes grew wide, as understanding flooded into them. "Then you have a lot to accomplish, to live up to his words. Such a lofty goal will demand much from you."

"You just let me worry about that," Luffy answered, sticking his tongue out at Hawkeyes.

"And what of you?" Mihawk eyed Kakashi.

"I'm not inclined to share that with you. But whether it will be accomplished within my lifetime is up to me to decide," he casually spoke.

Hawkeyes narrowed his gaze at the man. "A fair enough statement. But without the motivation or the aspirations to match those you sail with, then you will be a great obstacle to them, or drag them back from their full potential from a lack of investment."

"Luffy!" Everyone turned, as Zoro's voice called their attention, to see him raising a white sword to the heavens. "Can you hear me, captain!?"

"Yeah!"

"I'm sorry, for failing you. I know you need nothing less than the Best in the World beside you! I've let you down! Please-" fight not to cough, Zoro kept pleading, "-please forgive me!" Coughing blood, the man ignored Yosaku, Johnny, and Sakura's pleas for him to stop, too focused on his own pain and the wound to his pride.

"I solemnly swear!... From this moment forward....That I will never lose again!" the man vowed, with tears of shame in his eyes.

"Until the day comes that I can take his title! I... will never... never be defeated again! Is that ok, King of the Pirates!"

The swordsman waited, for Luffy's reply. As did Sasuke and Naruto, recalling their own goals and the struggles each carried from their separate losses and failures, respectively. Especially Sasuke, recalling every time Naruto had failed at the Academy, and how he ridiculed him for swearing to continue despite clear futility.

A strange emotion flickered within the Uchiha prodigy, joined by new feelings of admiration and inspiration for the man he had seen fall.

"Yep!" Luffy gave a simple answer. With a clear laugh that the last Uchiha couldn't fathom or understand.

Kakashi nodded, ending his jutsu and placing a hand on Luffy's shoulder. "Good to hear, Captain Luffy. Now that this is settled maybe we should speak about the problem with Nami stealing our ship. Oh, and maybe deal with the sad remains of Don Krieg's crew."

End.

[1]-Don Krieg did fancy himself as the Strongest Man in the World, at least in terms of military strength and numbers. The man may have been dangerous for the East Blue but was extremely ignorant of the wider world. Since he failed to recognize Hawkeyes, how likely is it that the fool was oblivious about Whitebeard too? The man might've been THE most ignorant, egotistical dumbass in the series; at least Bellemy was able to grow and learn.

The Battle and Pursuit

Chapter 9: The Battle and Pursuit.

Thanks to my BETA reader, Leaf Ranger.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

..Kurama Kyuubi no Kitsune... =Biju thought, or events within Naruto's seal.

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Within Naruto, interwoven with his chakra network, constrained by the Double Tetragram seal, water droplets echoed within the dank space Kurama, the Nine-tailed Fox, occupied. Looking out over the events surrounding his host, a flicker of interest stayed alit in the Biju's mind at the coming battle and duel Mihawk had won.

" Such foolish idiocy . That green-haired brat was even more outmatched than the Ichibi compared to me. Why do some in this world even hold to such tenants as honour or power opposed to their own cunning and will? This further shows they are no different than those in the accursed Leaf, or the Cloud. Still..."

A low growl rang through the darkness, before dying out as the Fox's mussel curled to form a cunning grin.

" The fury I hold towards this blonde brat for that infernal genie's wish and trapping us here will never disappear. Still... with no ninjas around there are few who could turn a watchful eye to this seal, and even less to maintain it."

The prisoner began to stroke the bars of his cage, chakra gathering near it both absorbed and dispelled.

' If he should draw out enough of my power so far away from the village. Then only that damned sharingan-brat would stand any chance of containing me, something he lacks even a sliver of the skill or power to accomplish. I can be released here, and none would have the power to defeat me, or seal my power into another infernal prison. The wish this brat made, has brought a permanent freedom so much closer for me. And once it finally comes...'

A feral, sadist's grin etched across his face, as nine tails thrashed with excitement. Just the image of all the chaos, fury and destruction Kurama could unleash without anyone to defeat him filled the fox with excitement and anticipation he hadn't felt for centuries.

' It will come, and righteously so. These humans have little difference from those cursed ninjas. Too weak to accomplish anything, obsessed with the righteousness of their own foolish morals, or covering their own weakness with false superiority. Should the green-haired bastard and the golden-armored fool be anything to go by.'

After Zoro made his pledge to Luffy, Kakashi nodded, ending his jutsu and placing a hand on his Captain's shoulder. "Good to hear, Captain Luffy. Now that this is settled, maybe we should talk about the problem with Nami stealing our ship. Oh, and deal with the sad remains of Don Krieg's crew."

"Right!" Luffy spun from happy to semi-serious. While Kakashi left with a body-flicker; ignoring Don Krieg's own challenge to Mihawk, the simple-minded Monkey D. extended his arm and grasped the railing of the Baratie, then flew over the gap, colliding with Patty and Carne.

"Thanks for the landing, guys," Luffy called, brushing dust from his pants, and strode off both the cooks stuck in the wall.

"So Nami just abandoned us like that," Naruto bristled. "We've gotta chase her down and get the boat back! And then make her pay, ya know."

"But we can't just leave Zeff and the cooks to fight Don Krieg alone," Sakura cried. "I mean, there must be around 60 of them left, if some were taken out when Mr Mihawk cut their galleon to pieces. And only Kakashi-sensei is good enough to do that much fighting alone. Plus, how can we track someone on the ocean?"

Usopp and Naruto did stop, rubbing their foreheads over the predicament.

"No idea, Sakura," Luffy answered, staring ahead with a plain look on his face. "But we don't go the Grand Line without a Ship. And not without Nami. So, we gotta bring her back." Luffy declared.

"No way! She left us alone when things got dangerous," Naruto complained "We can't trust someone like that, believe it!" He had his arms crossed, trying to force a denial.

Both Luffy and Naruto began arguing while Kakashi watched Mihawk depart. Then he stuck his nose high and took a whiff of the air.

"Tracking Nami won't be a problem, should that be what Luffy wants."

"GGGgggrrrrrrrr!There... shouldn't-"

"Zoro!" Sure enough, the swordsman had regained consciousness, barely. Everyone looked towards him, some with awe and others with newfound respect. All could hear his teeth clench against the massive cut as it still bled, but the man still pulled himself forward to speak

"Zoro-san, it's fine," Kakashi knelt, pressing the swordsman down, gently. "Mihawk has left and we can fight Krieg while-"

"N-no!-Gggrrrrr-Orders!" he shouted against the agony. "Captain's orders....every....follow them... always... gggrrr-" After one final strain, the man passed out, guaranteed to stay in oblivion for a long stretch.

The rest of the group looked on, confused.

"Well, then," Kakashi rose to his feet, looking back at the others. "I suppose that settles it," he smiled at Luffy. "I have a good nose for tracking, Captain. And whatever products or perfumes Nami uses, they left a strong scene behind. But can we defeat Don Krieg before chasing her?"

"WWHHHAAAAAAAAT!" most of them shouted, while Luffy simply blinked.

"You all heard Zoro," Kakashi deadpanned back to them. "The captain always decides where we go. And, should we ignore that," Kakashi waved his hand over Zoro's snoring form. "He, will probably be furious enough that upon waking, Zoro will attempt to cut us down. Or drive himself to death trying to. Luffy wants to follow Nami and get the Merry back. From what I see, we have no choice." With a casual shrug, Kakashi left Ussop, Naruto and Sakura stumped or fearful of just the proposition of Zoro's reaction.

But one person merely smirked. "Hhhmmm. I guess we shouldn't argue with them, then." Sasuke spoke up. "That's what Zoro wants us to do, and I'm with him. And he did join Luffy first, that makes him

the Vice-Captain. If both him, Luffy, and Kakashi agree, then let's chase down that little thief. Besides...."

Now the Uchiha was frowning, a new fire dancing in his eyes and tone. "I have a few things to give Nami for betraying us just over something as small as money or fear. Payback, for a start."

"Hey! Wh-wh-why does he get to be the Vice-captain and not ME! The mighty, monstrous captain Usopp!" Usopp whined, then thumped his chest, buffing it out and stood... as tall as he could.

"Yeah, why not let Kakashi-sensei take that job, Sasuke?" Naruto joined him.

"Simple,. Sakura glanced over between the nominees. "Usopp is too weak, too big a coward, and we lost the ship because of him. All of us ninjas, including Kakashi, are just with this crew temporarily. A rank like Zoro's should be permanent, and he's a lot more active than our lazy, perverted sensei." the Uchiha coolly appraised.

"Does anyone disagree?" Naruto stopped there, looking from Kakashi, to Zoro, then back at Kakashi again.

Kakashi did not hide a look of surprise towards Sasuke, while Johnny and Yosaku liked the idea, and Sakura instantly agreed with Sasuke. Usopp just slunk over to a corner; pouting, brooding and whimpering at the truth.

Sasuke grinned, until a large hand covered his head, none too gently.

"Shishishishishishishishi! I like the sounda that, too." Luffy praised, ruffling the boy's hair.

"C-Captain, cut it! Don't do that!" Sasuke threw his arm off, violently, but Luffy merely continued smiling.

"That's it, it's official. Zoro is my Vice-captain, and all of us we're going to chase after Nami. After beating Don Krieg's crew, men!"

"Well then," Kakashi spoke up, drawing out a kunai. Glancing off to see the Krieg Pirates still very distracted by Mihawk and struggling to reorganize on their wreckage of a ship. With a small figure prick, Kakashi drew blood into his palm, wove a series of hand signs, then went to his knees to plant that bloodied palm to the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!" A series of dark, intricate symbols burst in a complex array from his hand...

And nothing.

The markings calmly dissolved, with no change made. Kakashi glared down at his hand. 'Where are my dogs? No smoke or even a small pup emerged. My Sharingan is still out, and the chakra for my technique was successful. Why did it not work?'[1]

"Uhhh. Kakashi-san? That might have looked nice. But is it meant to do anything to help us?" Usopp asked.

Frowning at his hand, Kakashi tried the same with a touch more chakra, but the same results emerged; a summoning array appearing, then nothing.

'No time. And no sense wasting chakra,' he decided.

"Well. Too bad that option won't work," Kakashi remarked, before turning up to face the others.

"This technique is called a Summoning jutsu. Usually, I can use to call a pack of ninja hounds for help. They're experts for ambushing, misdirection and they can track just about anyone, anywhere. Something appears to be off, but I'll think over that later. For now...."

The Jonin turned his face to the air, taking a whiff with his nose.

"Nami left with the ship only minutes ago. There is enough of her scent left in the air that I can track her. Along with some other scents from the Merry. Plus, it's questionable if Nami could sail a Caravel ship too far on her own. She must have a destination in mind. Captain, if I could-"

A bullet cut off Kakashi's thought. Piercing through a wooden plank, centimeters from Luffy's head, and reminding the crew of where they were standing.

"Men! The next person to disobey me will share the same fate that fool I just shot," Don Krieg proclaimed. "Unless each of wish to die. Take that ship! Kill that geezer Zeff and bring me his logbook!" All of the Straw Hats were so distracted, they failed to notice Krieg murdering one of his own men, shooting him through the neck and the bullet travelled further to where they were. All the desperate Krieg Pirates were preparing a fresh attack!

"You're not touching that old cook!" Luffy shouted. Shooting both arms forward again, the Rubber-man launched himself at the pirates, legs spread out so far he clothes-line several of the enemy crew, and landed in another one head-first. All of them went overboard for a swim, while Luffy clung to a broken mast.

"Old-man Kakashi! I've gotta fight Krieg-guy. You go start chasing where Nami went. Take Zoro and Sakura with you," Luffy called back. "He's no good after those wounds, and she's too weak to fight here! Naruto, Johnny, Yosaku, Usopp, come on and help kicks these guys' butts!"

"Hey, Johnny and me are staying with Big-bro Zoro, too!" Yosaku declared. While Naruto was in a blur towards the chefs and Sasuke remained in place, conflicted, while Sakura was coloured by a wave of depression at Luffy's words.

"What," Sanji cried, incredulously. " What kind of idea is it sending him away when we need him here?!"

"Yeah, Sanji's right!" Patty agreed. "Kakashi's the bouncer. This is what we need him for the most!"

"Ha! So, you pair of idiots actually can agree on something," Zeff dryly barked. "No, the rubber brat is right. I already let the ninjas resign this mornin' anyways. Most of the threat Krieg's men bring is from their numbers, not their own strength. Plus, they've been starving for weeks, so they aren't in top condition for a real fight, so fresh after a meal. Thanks to the lot of you and Naruto's clones, they aren't a problem to sweat over. The only issue here is Krieg himself, and maybe that strange pearly bastard."

"Sanji, Naruto, Sasuke. Keep a close eye on this Straw Hat-brat," Zeff called over at them "If all three of you stay, watch closely how he fights. Don't take your eyes off him for a moment," the chef sagely advised them. While the cooks were cheering at the sight of Luffy knocking down more of their attackers left and right.

Kakashi processed Zeff's comments, glancing across the battlefield, then began to contemplate. 'Zeff is certainly right, plus the arrogance of their captain means they likely will run straight to a big defeat here. Krieg's just throwing men away instead of taking a more organized approach or leading his men into battle himself. Zeff and Sanji aren't people to walk over, plus with Naruto's clones, the cooks and Luffy have them handled them.'

'Plus... where Nami went and what could be waiting there is a big unknown,' Kakashi stared in the direction Nami's scent was pointing them 'Whoever goes to follow her would be taking quite a risk, assuming it'll be less dangerous than here. Sending anyone else, especially my Genin, there on their own would be a huge risk. I can keep a close eye on Sakura if she's with me, and we can track or investigate Nami's actions without getting mixed up in a fight needlessly.

"Kakashi!"

Turning at his student's voice, Kakashi was surprised to find Sasuke's eyes filled with purpose. And....

"I'm staying with Zoro." Sasuke declared.

Kakashi eyed him closely, then nodded. "Johnny, Yosaku!"

"Yeah, what is it Big-bro Kakashi!" Both were standing nearby, swords out and ready to face anyone that got close to Zoro.

"I have some medical training that can help Zoro. Enough to patch him up until we can find a doctor to close the wound he received from Mihawk. Sakura, Sasuke and I will take him while chasing after Nami. I swear, he will be alright."

Both tried to shoot down that idea, but Kakashi spoke up first. "After we find Nami, I'll send a message back here to let you know where to follow us towards. You both seem to know how to get around the different islands here very well, and two extra swords against Don Krieg wouldn't go amiss. Plus, for aiding them why not you both collect the bounty on his. Then guide Luffy, Usopp and Naruto after the battle."

The pair looked straight at Zoro. While absent-minded and somewhat lacking, neither was stupid. But they didn't want to leave their friend while hurt.

"Grrrr. Alright," Yosaku bit out. "Johnny and me can't do much to help Big Bro Zoro. Look after him Kakashi, or you'll answer to us and Luffy-san!"

Kakashi nodded approvingly at the pledge. "Good. I will need some help lifting Zoro to one of the boats around the back. Johnny, are you up for it?"

"Sure."

"Naruto, help out Zeff and Captain Luffy with your clones," Kakashi ordered. "Johnny, Yosaku, move Zoro and prep our boat. Sakura, Sasuke, guide them there in manji formation." Everyone followed their orders, while Kakashi drew out two kunai in each hand and kept a close watch over the battle, bodies, weapons and bullets remained flying at random, some nearly hitting Yosaku yet Kakashi spied and parried or sliced through them easily, aided by his Sharingan. Sasuke and Sakura stayed in formation with their own kunai out, guiding Zoro aboard the boat they had arrived in from Hanma village. Once the swordsman was deposited, Johnny helped them cast off, yelled some words of encouragement as Kakashi began to bandage Zoro, and dashed away to the rejoin fight.

Before the fray, Usopp could barely move. His eyes were darting left and right, unsure of where or what to do and overwhelmed by how chaotic the battle had grown. 'Darn. Wh-wh-why di-didn't I ask to go w-w-with Ka-ka-kakashi, Sasuke, Zoro and Sakura a moment ago?' The sniper's thoughts came a rapid-fire, nearly paralyzed with fear. Everywhere he looked, violence and danger were far too close for comfort.

Krieg had shown to be somewhat competent, calling his men to change tact. Instead of just a shapeless rush, they were now repositioning what cannons they left to target the Baratie, but filled with what he called "bloody-scatter shot." None of it sounded good, and while they moved about some of his crew were gathering together in small groups or trying to hit Luffy but not attacking the cooks.

Luffy was knocking down any enemy Pirates he could reach, while they followed Krieg's orders to cut apart the mast he stood on to force the Devil-fruit user into the ocean. While Naruto had made more clones and was charging out over the water to help their captain, though barely anyone noticed. The cooks were not inactive either.

"Take this you waste of space!" Patty cried, aiming a lobster-shaped bazooka at Krieg.

"Indigestion Meatball!" With a bang, a considerable cannonball shot from the lobster, aiming for Krieg.

"Yes, knock him down!" Usopp cried out. The shot continued flying, right past Krieg to hit the wreckage behind the Don. "Bastard, you missed!" Carne shouted. "Well that was just stupid," Sanji casually spoke.

"Give me a break! Ammunition ain't cheap, so I don't practice much with this! Come on Carne, let's get the Sabagashira!" Dropping the weapon, both cooks went running for somewhere else, while Sanji, Zeff and Gin stayed out on the deck, eyeing Krieg carefully.

'Okay... wh-whatever Krieg's doing can't be good," Ussop reasoned. "Come on, Usopp, do something. These guys... these murderous pirates... the danger here and death...'

"Usopp-san! I need some help here!" Naruto cried as he kicked away more of the gathering enemy pirates. Sanji's training sessions were really paying off, as the Blonde continued throwing various kicks that knocked back any pirates nearby. Still, the orange knucklehead had gone too far, charging out with his clones towards Luffy.

"Hey, Naruto!" the Captian called to him, as another Krieg pirate swung out with a blade, to meet Luffy's head-butt. "Come on up on the mast, it's easier to stand on."

"Nahh, I'm fine down here captain," the Uzumaki called back. "Plus some guys are just plain stupid." The boy responded. One enemy charged for where the ninja stood on the water, and with one foot out he sunk below the surface.

"Shishishishishishi! Good point!" Luffy agreed. "Here. Laugh at this you two! Or better yet, dance!" one pirate cursed them as he lowed the muzzles of two pistols. More of the surrounding guys drew weapons and took aim at the Straw Hats.

"Those won't work on me, dummies," Luffy stated.

"But they will on the kid. He's dead!"

"Special Attack! Exploding stars!" A new player joined the waltz, as a tiny pellet hit the enemy, detonating in their face and he toppled over into the sea. "Exploding star!-exploding star-exploding star!" Usopp kept calling each attack, and every shot hit its mark, leaving so much gunpowder it obscured Luffy and Naruto.

"Great shot Usopp!" Luffy looked back at his nakama. The long-nosed teenager grinned, with shaky legs. "No problem. But maybe you and Naruto should get back here and hit them from a distance. Preferably right in front of me while I cover you," he asked while frozen in place.

"No way, that's boring," Luffy frowned. "Plus, I said I'd beat up the Gong, and that's what I'm gonna do."

"Don! It's Don Krieg you imbecile!" Krieg hollered over. "There is nobody who can touch me through this Wootz Steel Armor. If my men can't knock you down, then I will! Dangan!"

Immediately, the traitorous captain drew a pair of dual-pistols from his cape, while 10 additional barrels protruded from his shoulders and hips. "Take this you insects!" Krieg glared over at Luffy and Naruto, planting his feet down as every gun was aimed at the pair.

"Psyke!" Krieg turned his body, grinning manically as weapons were turned on the Baratie cooks. "All you cooks are dead!-"

True to his dirty-play epithet, Krieg had taken aim at Luffy to trick his enemies. Now all his guns were pointed at a more defenseless target. "Exterminate-"

Crack-"Ahh-whaa? Baa-Pfffoooooo- "Aaaahhh!" The pistols dropped from the Don's hands since his face was engulfed with smoke. The timing was so perfect, as the rancid projectile had struck his teeth and cracked open.

"Hehehe! Good try, but I know that trick!" Usopp called out. The sniper had picked up on Krieg's idea and shot a rotten egg into the man's face. One part Krieg had failed to protect at all with his armour, slimy crops of yoke was in his eyes, nose and mouth. Then in the midst of clawing it away, an exploding star hit the man while he remained blind.

"Hey, hitting someone like that is just a dirty trick!"

"That bastard took a cheap shot at Don Krieg. Crush him!"

Most of Krieg's men had all their attention on Usopp, cursing him for hitting their captain. While the liar grinned back at them, from where he stood. "Yeah, come on over here and get knocked down! You won't make it within three steps of me!"

"Brat!" Zeff cried out at the shrimp crouched beside his knees.

"That's real brave to say while hiding behind somebody else."

While the Straw hat sniper was shaking in his shoes, the cooks were fighting the Pirates again and not doing well against desperate men. yet Zeff looked on unperturbed. "Brat. Think you can handle this many, or do I need to nurse-maid you?" he asked the sous-chef.

The man lit a fresh cigarette, filled with calm composure. "Don't belittle me, geezer. Naruto, get over here beside me, kid!"

"Yes, Sanji-sensei!" the boy came bounding up from the water and running for Sanji. The elder blonde met him halfway and both strode into the fray.

"Doubtfully it could possibly do you any good!" a familiar voice came from the water.

"Wrong! Set-sail, Makerel-Head One, the Baratie's secret weapon!"

From the ship, a ship-shaped figurehead detached, unveiling several small mortars and a crest before it began to glide through the water.

While the Krieg pirates looked on bemused.

"Peddal-faster!" "You pedal faster!" Carne and Patty cried at one another from inside.

"WHHhhoooooaaaaaa!" Luffy had his eyes wide, gushing over the contraption. "Cool, I want to drive it! I've gotta do that sometime!" Even Naruto had stopped and was dancing in his eyes. Growing brighter as the attack boat fired at the wreck, stirring up waves in scattering the gathered squads of Don Krieg's men.

"AHhh!"

"Naruto!" he barely heard, hurled aside by a tiny powerful tap on his cheek. He spun over for some moments before landing against the railing of the Baratie.

"Pearl you fool! Never damage my new ship again, or it'll be your head!"

Sanji glanced up, spying on the shield-clad man from before standing on the fins.

"Hahahaha. So, let's do this," the man decided, ignoring Krieg.

"But first, I feel included to warn you. I am Pearl, the invincible Shield. You have witnessed the power of my powerful Pearl Surprise, one of my signature attacks you bumbling buffoons!" Until a few men were sent flying in a compact collision past Pearl's face.

"Hey. Not one person touches the kid! You alright, Naruto?" Sanji announced, standing over his student, holding a knife that was about to cut the dazed Genin's throat.

"Y-yeah... ugh... I'm okay Sanji-senpai," the ninja replied, shaking his head clear from the hit.

"You useless cooks can never fight!" "Rip him apart!" more of Krieg's men had reached the fins and made a bead line for Sanji. In a

second, the ship's cook left their sight. Landing on his hands, Sanji's feet were twisting in a whirlwind, knocking heads, chins and necks aside, or hooking one to collide with another.

Sanji's body flowed with his momentum, moving upright with a windmill kick that sent another two off the fins. Then planted that foot down to raise the other, driving a straight kick into a final pirate. His victim coughed so hard blood came spraying from his mouth, whilst the chef stayed perfectly balanced on his one leg, then took a fresh smoke.

"I'll show you scum what a mere cook can do after I fillet every bastard here." But then Sanji grew confused and surprised. While Pearl felt a strange, sharp tug at his ear.

Most of the assembled pirates gapped in fear, spying a tricked of blood down the Shield-man's cheek where a knife from the man Sanji kicked away nicked him by accident.

"Now, what is this. I have won everyone one of my 61 battles and no one has touch-" Snapping, the man drove his own hand shield into his nose, leading to more blood dripping from it. All of the Krieg Pirates were shaking.

"Ghhhh. This isn't good. Calm down!" Krieg gritted.

"These people aren't just mean, they're dangerous." The "invincible man" complained. Before driving his hands together, knocking up a ruckus. Screeching in fear all the while.

"Danger! Danger! Danger! Danger! Dangeeeeeerr!" white flames erupted from Pearl, as the situation went from bad to worse.

"Hey, suck it up, you fat baby. Come on," Naruto complained, back on his feet. "If you haven't had any blood before, you really are weak since you're not willing to take it and stay cool."

The ninja began to rush forward, thinking to kick him backwards into the water and douse the flames.

"Owe!" "Captain, help!" Nobody moved, as the shout came from the residential Head-chef. Naruto's feet drove skids in the deck before his eye beheld a nightmare.

"Gin!" "Chef Zeff!" "Ussop!"

"The battle ends here," Gin whispered, one foot planted over Zeff's back, one arm locked around Ussop's left, and a double-barrel pistol inches from Zeff's head.

"Gin! Kill him! That weakling in your grasp that dared to strike your captain, I order you to kill him!" Krieg spoke up, a sneer of triumph in his voice.

"Don. This one's barely worth any of it. Red-Foot is the real value. I don't care how much of a badass he was once upon a time. The cook care for him, so unless they want to see him harmed, each of you has to leave." Gin calmly suggested.

"Hmmm. Not a bad thought, but pointless. They're dead anyways. Kill the geezer first, then the brat."

Now, the Man-Demon hesitated. "Please. Don't make this any harder, Sanji, Naruto. I owe the pair of you my life. Just surrender and leave, build a new place somewhere else or chase after your wayward crewmate. This fight needs to end."

"No! Gin, how could you do this!" Naruto cried out, begging for time. "Three days back and today we gave you any help you asked for. Please, let them go or help us drive Krieg off," the blonde ninja begged.

"I'm sorry, Naruto but-Ooofff!" Gin was launched forward, tumbling over the deck before landing on his side.

"Hey, that's not how men fight!" "Yay, if you want to be of use, then try facing down us!"

Johnny and Yosaku had blind-sided the man-demon, both planting a kick on his head from behind as Naruto distracted him.

"If you wanna fight anyone, then we're right up for the job," both levelled their broadswords and charged.

"Yeah, this fight belongs to us!" "Say your prayers, Krieg!" Patty called out, from the Mackerel One, nearly right on top of Krieg. With a glance of annoyance, the Commodore was engulfed by a salvo from the cannons. Yet...

... the smoke cleared to reveal him standing in place. Not even a dent could be seen in his armour as the man seized the boat with his left hand.

"I am Don Krieg. The Man Who Will Rule All The Seas. Get Outta Here!" Fueled by his furry, the Don hefted the boat overhead, then tossed it back at the Baratie. Mackerel One sailed through the sky, turning side-over-side, and tossing Patty and Carne out in the process. Before it crashed down in the center of the fins.....right on top of Pearl.

"Hmm. If that idiot let his flames out of control, it would burn my new ship to kindling. Men, have the bloody-scatter shot ready!"

"No worries, Don!" Gin's voice called over. Weaving around Johnny and Yosaku's slashes. The bounty hunters moved in tandem, striking from left high-right low, on diagonal the other horizontally, always moving on opposite sides to keep their enemy stretched thin. Gin had a pair of metal tonfa's in hand, with solid round weighted at one end, parrying or weaving through their strikes. He was untouched but panting while the other pair were bruised-up.

Still, they'd given Usopp and Naruto some breathing room and kept driving Gin away from Zeff. Sanji and Luffy stood in the centre,

looking out on what Krieg's next move would be.

"Psst. Naruto, I've got an idea. You've gotta be fast," Usopp whispered.

While the two pranksters conspired, Johnny and Yosaku continued to clash with the Man-Demon, herding the Krieg officer around the deck with their joined skills. Pearl himself stood back, monologuing about his great power and the futility of their efforts, again.

After some moments, sparks flew as Gin blocked their slashes, beginning a test of strength with their broadswords. Yet the Man-demon held up, up while Johnny took a breath. Quickly, the sunglass-spanned fighter took a well-timed groin kick, buckling under the dirty tactic. Yosaku cried in worry before giving one more slash at Gin, but emotion carried him off-balance. Gin spun around left, driving the front pole of his left-hand weapon into Yosaku's skull, knocking his lights out.

The grey-clad figure stood up, panting from the fight. 'Not the toughest guys around, but they made a decent effort to stop and me more than a few close calls.'

"Don! Th' fight's nearly under control here, now." Gin declared, drawing out his pistol and moving back towards Zeff, who'd since returned to his feet.

"Not good enough, Gin! Men, blast Scattering shot over those fins and get the pests out of my new ship!" the Commodore declared, gesturing at the 7 cannons that had been retrieved and reorientated.

"What! But Don, Pearl and I are still here on the Fins!" Gin cried, incredulously.

"So, like you, Gin. My impenetrable defense will hardly make that a threat, unlike your lack of any such measures." The man tusked, utterly complacent with his stupidity.

"Pearl, y' dumbass. Your neck and arms are exposed, and that weapon can still hit you from behind!" Gin shouted, offset by Krieg's impatience.

"This battle has gone on too long since that Straw Hat bastard mocked me! And Mihawk is only getting further away from my retribution!" Krieg proclaimed, the fury in his eyes devoid of reason or empathy. As 10 different scavenged cannons were levelled at the fins. "Go! Bloody-scatter!"

Splash! The surf near Krieg's floating stations blew out, some unseen force from below bursting out.

"Hahahahahaha! Moving through the water really is a great way to ambush them!" a high voice came, joined by dozens of silhouettes.

"What the! How have Fishman come here!"

The Going Merry cruised over the midday surf. A shifting wind picked up the sails, spurring the ship closer to Cocoyashi Village. Nami stood by the stern, having changed into a tank top with her shoulders bare one hand kept nervously brushing over her saw-toothed shark tattoo, in between anxious glances back towards the Baratie. 'Still no one on the horizon. Maybe Kakashi really was too distracted to notice. Or Usopp didn't tell them and drowned....No!' the girl shuddered. A low growl passed through her gritting teeth, betraying deep frustrations. 'Just forget about them....'

But her mind betrayed Nami's Nami, travelling back to thoughts from three especially memorable children. *"Hey, you've got to get back to work out, or otherwise there'll be no Black-leg training tonight!" Sanji scolded a pint-sized pest following his shadow.'*

"But it's my lunch break, and I'd really love some Ramen, Sanji-senpai! Come on, why can't you make some like yesterday!?" Naruto tried to reason with the pervy cook. Nami grinned as Sanji carried a

fresh meal towards her, with hearts clear in his eye while Naruto followed him.'

"I said it already, Naruto. Men like you and I were put on this earth to serve ladies, customers, and ourselves; and in that order. There's a lady right there, and plenty of other customers, so you're at the far back of the line," Sanji stood by his mantra. Though Nami's eyes narrowed at Naruto giggling impishly.'

"Well....in that case." The boy cracked his knuckles, before joining them, producing a screen of steam. "Sexy-jutsu: Naruko's Request!"

'Sanji's entire form shook. One foot pausing just above the floor, his entire body rigid then began slowly vibrating with steamy anticipation. A new form came through the smoke, in the middle of the lunch rush hour.

"~Oh... Sanji-kun~. ~You'll always prepare Ramen for a hungry, cutesy person like me, now would you?~" "Naruko" cooed over the cook. Steam was blown through Sanji's nose, while Zeff burst through the door, but did nothing at the sight. Everyone was confused, while Sakura's face landed in her palm.'

'Nami was amazed, her jaw dropping to the floor. "Naruko" even began to make crocodile tears at Sanji, begging for his service. Gradually, Sanji moved forward like a metal automaton; placing Nami's order at the table before he strode past the pleading female and inside the kitchen.

"Well, good thing he left her with clothes on. Unlike last time." Kakashi muttered from one side. "Naruko" was clad in booty shorts and a spaghetti top, then tentatively swayed over to where Nami was still sitting. 5 minutes later, Sanji emerged with a steaming bowl of Ramen in hand and placed it beside "Naruko." "~Oh, thank you, Sanji-kun~ I'll certainly repay you later," before she leaned forwards, rubbing a pair of assets into his arm, "Any way you want it?"

'That action sent a tear through Nami's mind-to the last days of Bellemere's life. Reminding her of the joking with Bellemere and Genzo... her beloved mother smiled coyly as she promised, "I'll pay you back... with my body!"'

'Later, Naruto and Sasuke were strolling around on the roof, cleaning different nocks, crannies and a stain from onion soup sent air-born by one whiny customer. Nami looked on with awesome below, sipping tea with a dreamy tangerine fruit tart.'

""First walking on water, now up and over ceilings and walls. Those are some very amazing skills, the pair of you have. And much better than the other lazy-bums on this crew, Sasuke and Naruto," she called up.'

'Sasuke hmphed at the words, while Naruto smiled. "You really think so, Nami-san?" Naruto's response made Nami beam at the sight. She adored children, and the young boy's smile couldn't help but warm her heart.'

""Your parents must be proud to have such a helpful hand when you're at home, Naruto-kun."

She thought the compliment would have brought happiness, not the gaunt eyes of depression and sorrow that met her. The boys looked away, shuffling off along the roof.

""Naruto-kun? Sasuke-kun? You... do... you have any parents?" Nami pushed through the lump in her throat. She could recognize the loss in those eyes on anyone, best of all herself.'

'Neither boy responded for several moments, while Nami remained frozen in her seat. Until Sasuke responded, "My parents were stolen from me... by a murderer years ago." Naruto glanced at his teammate, before turning back to his job. "I never knew my parents. They died the same day I was born."'

'His voice grew lower at each word. The only sound in the dining room was Nami's spoon, clattering to the ground. Her heart went out to the pair, relating to as a double-orphan. [1]'

Desperately, Nami shut her mind out from the pangs of regret and focused on the present.

'I'm too close now. Thanks to the treasure on this ship, I'll need just one final trip away. Back to Cocoyoshi village, a few more days to draw different maps, then check in with Nojiko, and all the pain and effort will be worth it.'

Looking out to the horizon, the silhouette of her home archipelago blinked in the distance.

Making Nami's nervousness grow, as she glanced backwards-and gasped.

'No....no, he caught up! I know he's fast from that altercation with the Marines, but how can-' Nami held her breath.....

"Uzumaki Squad Strike!" a voice rang over the ocean-surface battlegrounds. From the upsurge of water, several scores of Naruto's were flying towards the cannon positions Krieg had prepared. Their gunners were too shocked to respond, Naruto had easy targets. The orange-clad clones either knocked the pirates back with a solid kick to the head or stomped down on the heads; human steppingstones to hit those a little further away.

In seconds, all of the cannons were clear, leaving none of them manned while the other participants gawked in awe at the sight.

"Great job Naruto, just like we planned! Now lift those Cannons overboard so they don't have any weapons left!"

"Thanks, Usopp! You really are a great prankster!" One Naruto gave him a thumbs-up, while the other clones scrambled to lift the

cannons sideways. With 10 gathered around each canon, they gradually began to offset the lighter pieces and teeter them around, under Krieg's hateful glare.

"Hey, kid! Tell me!" Krieg's voice reached the blonde. "Hhh. Do you truly wish for riches, power, and to serve under the might of the ruler of all the seas?" Krieg's face now wore an eager smirk, with bright shades of greed gleaming in his eyes.

"Come, join my forces and you will be a captain in your own right, within my pirate fleet! Your powers definitely aren't from a devil fruit to move through the water, making you all the more powerful without their weakness. I command you, join my Pirate Armada!" Krieg voiced his desires to Naruto.

"No way!" Naruto replied. "You treat your own men like they don't even matter. Plus you went there and failed already and are a giant golden ball of stupid. I don't want riches here, I just wanna get back home, and the Grand Line is the way to get there. Luffy's a much stronger Pirate than you, so I'll follow him."

With that, all 7 salvaged cannons crashed overboard, removing them from the battle.

"Ghuhahahahahahaha! Awesome answer Naruto! I knew it was a great choice asking you to come with us!" Luffy praised, leading all of the clones to gush with pride. While the cooks cheered at this boon in their fight, and Naruto's choice not to side with Krieg.

While the pirate Admiral's fury was toeing near its limits. "You Dare Deny Don Krieg!"

End.

So things are really taking shape.

As for Kurama, he can only know as much as Naruto does about where they are. And what dangers can be found in the world of One

Piece. He's equally as ignorant of the Grand Line, the Marine Admirals, and the Yonko as Team 7 is. After all, can anyone imagine him challenging Whitebeard to a fight, or a Celestial Dragon sending Marine Admirals to subdue him as a pet, a trophy, or a new attack dog for the Navy?

Please, share your feedback on this chapter.

[1]-If it was that easy, why stay in the One Piece world at all. Summoning's are Space-time, jutsu. And I didn't feel like throwing in a long-winded explanation for why or if they could come into the One Piece World, and nobody else. Plus....1/2 of my favorite plot-lines for this story would be rendered plot holes with them involved.

[2]-Nami herself was found by a toddler Nojiko in a village after a pirate raid. Bellemere adopted her after she lost her family in the battle, and Nami herself watched Arlong murder her adoptive mother. Nami herself has been twice orphaned in her life.

Worth of a Captain

Chapter 10: The Worth of a Captain

and their Crew

Special thanks to my Beta-reader: Leaf Ranger.

Announcement: Fanfictions can be great to write, and amazing to read. Many different series and franchises have fantastic stories, and they fill us with awe and enjoyment so much that it generates motivation to write our own ideas because the classic versions were amazing.

Some stages or arcs of popular stories can become difficult due to how iconic they are. The classic story can involve the characters at their best, and omitting them can be extremely unpopular. But so many re-writes in different stories have been made, they become little more than cut-and-paste projects, with small changes in the setting while the same events, confrontations, conversations and results all remain the same. No originality.

I like to be more original and balance that with the best of the canon material in stories that I write. So, for the Arlong Arc, I have three ideas for how the climax of the arc can happen and am going to let the readers vote through a Review.

- 1)** Luffy vs. Arlong. The classic is too great to ignore. The clash between captains, and show Nami, Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi what happens if one of Luffy's nakama gets hurt.
- 2)** Kakashi vs. Arlong. Luffy got to fight Krieg, let the Sharingan stand out. And show the Straw Hats what happens when Kakashi grows angry, after seeing a comrade hurt, betrayed and abused.
- 3)** Naruto and Sasuke vs. Arlong. The underdogs against a detestable murderer. Both can relate to Nami in different ways, and

Arlong betraying her means he needs to pay, or get out-foxed.

Each of these will have different consequences. Influencing who and how different Straw Hat members fight Arlong's crew. And the repercussions that will come after the battles.

Please vote in a Review!

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

""*Inner thoughts*""= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Soft waves broke at their crest, splashing against the haul of the tiny ship. Sasuke's eyes continued spying the horizon from the bow, with a few glances to his sensei. Kakashi stood at his shoulder, nose pointed high and searching for their wayward comrade's trail. 'Why is he obsessed with that mask, even with a mission like this?!' the Uchiha thought, incredulously.

"Sasuke. I need to keep a focus on Nami's scent or else lose it out here to the surf. How do Zoro's bandages look?" Kakashi spoke up, sparing a glance at his Genin. Turning over to their wounded companion. Sasuke saw the first mate hadn't moved an inch. Zoro was laid out in the middle of their boat, with Sakura close by, standing vigil over the wounded man. She was spying if somebody else was following them as well, but no news had come since Sakura had announced the Baratie had dropped out of sight some time ago.

"He's not groaning anymore, and there isn't any blood seeping through the bandages," Sasuke reported. "He's out cold for now."

Turning back to his sensei, Kakashi was fumbling with his mask. "Ohhh!" Hurriedly, the cloth was back up from taking an unobstructed whiff from the air, whilst nobody could spot his face.

"Good... good to hear," Kakashi nodded, while one of Sasuke's eyes was twitching. "Helm, turn us 15 degrees to the right! I found Nami's scent again." The Jonin called to a second Kakashi at the rear of the boat. Nodding, the clone made the adjustments to their course.

"Sensei?" Sakura called over. "Why did you bother with that water clone instead of shadow clones? When Naruto makes them they last longer, and we could have three or four of them here instead of just that one."

Kakashi spared a glance at the girl, then looked to his clone. The copy-Kakashi nodded, leaving the real one to look back over the bow while it chuckled. "While that might be true," water-clone Kakashi spoke, "I'm afraid that's for Naruto but not me. Your teammate can afford spamming that technique far more than I can or will ever be capable of."

Sasuke took his eyes off their target, and Sakura's head shook. Clone Kakashi looked between them and spotted the questions forming on their lips. "Wait, I'll explain," he held one hand up, appealing for them to not speak. "Shadow clones might be quick and simpler. But since they are composed of pure chakra, the costs to make and sustain them are ten times more challenging than elemental clones. It's... how can I put it... awesome but impractical? Anybody who tries sustaining multiple clones can wind up more exhausted than I get overusing my Sharingan, plus, water clones and shadow clones are around par towards durability. Creating replacements like me isn't closer to fatal as multiple replacement shadow-clones are."

"Then how can the idiot use that jutsu so much, sensei?" Sasuke's curiosity was piqued.

"Everyone has their own talents, Sasuke," Clone Kakashi answered. "Naruto, may not have much natural aptitude with theory or the complexities behind different jutsu. But his chakra levels are a different matter entirely. He already has, at least, twice the size of my own chakra pool. Leaving simple but highly taxing jutsu very simple for him to exercise. But that's not important right now," Clone Kakashi answered, sternly.

"We don't have any idea of how far Nami will travel, or how much time will pass before catching up to her. Using water as a medium for a clone like me is more sustainable for this situation."

"Focus on the jobs at hand," Clone Kakashi directed them. "For Sakura, that is Zoro's condition. For Sasuke, spotting any traces of Nami. I can't afford to use my own Sharingan without collapsing after too long or being rendered too drained for any surprises we encounter. Nor can I afford to shift attention and lose her scent in all the salty air of this sea."

Sasuke nodded, pushing his thoughts over the blonde teammate aside. "Right," he nodded, growling at the reminder of Nami's abandonment. "We need to find that cowardly, sell out, bitch, and get the ship back. Especially after this betrayal the same moment danger showed up."

"I'm not certain that kind of language is appropriate to address her by, Sasuke. Have you been listening to the rest of the Baratie cooks too much?" The real Kakashi spoke up this time.

"Though I do agree, she does need to be accosted for abandoning her own comrades like this." True to himself, the Jonin was quite incised that Nami would simply abandon her own friends; bring herself lower than scum with that decision.

Sakura glanced up at their words. Her own mind recalled how she viewed Nami as happy and close to all of the Straw Hats. 'They looked so much like true friends, especially Miss. Nami. Her smiles were just so happy and pretty, even when the others were causing

trouble. Why would she leave like that? Does it have something to do with...'

'Wait!' Sakura's eyes widened, her mind drawing pieces together. 'That poster of Arlong. Miss. Nami had some kind of reaction to it, like it mattered to her or something. And afterwards, she behaved a little strangely. Could she have gone after him, or be connected to that pirate at all? No, that doesn't make sense. And Johnny-san described-'

"Sensei," Sakura called out towards him. "I think I might know where Miss. Nami is going!"

Kakashi turned in good eye towards Sakura, while Sasuke whirled around. "What gives you an idea of her destination, Sakura? And how did you arrive at this idea just now?"

The girl took a moment to organize her thoughts.

"Yesterday, after Naruto, Luffy and Usopp sprang their prank on your clone. As the trap went off, Johnny-san and Yosaku-san sprang to their feet, causing some wanted posters to scatter on the floor. One of them caught Nami's attention, showing an image of a pirate called 'Saw-tooth' Arlong."

"His bounty was even higher than Don Krieg, at 20,000,000 bellies. When she saw the poster, Miss. Nami kind of spaced out. She even began trembling. When Johnny asked why, she became pretty aggressive and secretive about it."

Kakashi's eye narrowed at his Genin's description. "You think this Arlong has some connection to her?" He coaxed her to continue.

She nodded. "Y-yes, sensei. Miss. Nami did look interested in Arlong. I think they might be connected, or have had some encounter with each other before. She told us that things she enjoys the most are money, tangerines, and drawing a map of the world.

But she dislikes giving away money, and murderous pirates," placing emphasis on the latter fact.

"So, what. She probably just took the boat to keep the Krieg-pirates away from their treasure and hoard it to herself, and is going after Arlong to get more from his bounty," Sasuke suggested.

Sakura grew quiet at his suggestion, pondering over her crush's idea. "S-s-Sasuke-kun. Th-that doesn't make sense," she hesitantly answered.

Sasuke glared at her mildly, but Kakashi intervened. "Sasuke. A ninja should never overlook something or admonish an idea that contradicts their own. Sakura. You should always listen to your instincts, instead of following the thoughts of others. You're a sharp girl with book smarts and solving puzzles. Tell me more. Did you notice anything that doesn't make sense?"

After a while, Sakura nodded. "Y-yes, sensei. This "Arlong's" bounty is very high, and Miss. Nami does love money. But Nami-san is a thief, not a bounty hunter. And if she was a coward like Sasuke-kun thinks, then why would she think about going to confront him at all.

Plus, if she had wanted to betray the crew, she could have just suggested that we attack Arlong together, then steal any treasure he might have while the rest of us were fighting, loaded it onto the boat, then stolen to Merry. Letting her get even more money."

"When Nami was looking at the poster, Sasuke-kun. She looked a little bit like you did while talking about w-w-wanting to kill s-s-somebody important. I think Miss. Nami might have some kind of past that involves Along, or she's connected to him in some way."

Sasuke himself stiffened at the comparison, while Sakura continued to speak.

"I went to talk to Johnny-san and Yosaku-san afterwards, and according to them, Arlong is close to a place called Cocoyashi village

in the Conomi Islands. Maybe that is where she's going."

Kakashi's eye lingered on Sakura for a few moments. Before nodding at his clone near the stern. The second Kakashi stepped forward, pulling out one of Tarm's maps while Sasuke was mulling over Sakura's words. Some moments passed as the clones took measurements and followed the sea charts.

"Sakura," the clone called over after a few minutes.

"Y-y-y-y-yes sensei?" she answered.

Soon, the clone was patting her head in approval. "Good job recalling and piecing those ideas together. Especially this close to the Baratie."

The real Kakashi beamed, gathering his hands together in a cross-shape. "Shadow-clone jutsu!" One immediately appeared beside him, waiting for their instructions.

"According to these maps, Nami's trail is moving towards the Conomi islands. Now that we have a destination, my third clone can travel back to the Baratie and inform Luffy and the others. While we plan out our next move to take upon arrival."

Zeff's eyes cast over the battleground so aggravatingly close to his restaurant. For now, the sway and tide hung in the balance. The remainder of Krieg's men were down to half their strength, but still numerically superior to the cooks and their allies. Patty and Carne had crawled out and stood with the rest of his staff. Gin had beaten Yosaku and Johnny, and now Sanji was between the Man-Demon and anyone else. Luffy was still up, but Naruto was out on the wreckage, with Don Krieg sputtering in fury over the orange ninja's refusal.

"In this world, everyone is either with you or against you! And all who antagonize or deny Don Krieg, shall be CRUSHED!" the failed

commodore roared, drawing back his flail. The massively spiked weapon was cast in an arc, forcing Naruto to jump high to avoid it and land on the water.

Kreig smirked evilly, tossing several bottles forward towards Naruto's landing spot. With a pistol from his cape, the bottles shattered, splashing oil across the ocean surface.

"Kaen Hoshia!" from his wrist, a flamethrower emerged, setting the oil alight.

"Brat!" "Naruto!" Zeff shouted at the sight of Naruot falling towards a fresh inferno, while Sanji dashed forward to find some way to save him, unafraid of the flames.

Naruto went scrambling, searching for something within range to save himself, panicking so heavily that a few things slipped his mind. "Oh crap! Crap! Crap! Ugh-"

"Gum-gum: Rescue!" Luffy solved the problem, snatching Naruto from the air and yanking the boy back to safety. Well....the safety of being knocked into the wall of the Baratie. "Oh, sorry, Naruto." The captain called over.

"You Brat!" Zeff shouted, angrily. "Are you trying to wreck my restaurant or save it? And why be so careless with your own men!"

"I said I was sorry. And I was trying to stop him from getting his butt lit on fire. That can hurt a lot, you know." Luffy tried to excuse.

"Naruto's a tough guy. So, I'm sure he can take it. Unlike the weak bozos that follow this Krieg-guy."

"Weak! How can you know about weakness when you never had strength to begin with!" Now Krieg twirled the spiked ball over 2 meters above his head. "Now quit stalling my men or my ambitions with your useless honour to defend my ship!"

The flail sailed through the air, aimed straight at Luffy. For all his faults, Krieg knew how to handle the weapons in his arsenal. Yet the strength and skill he carried with each was a separate matter entirely. Luffy's arms curled back for a bazooka, parrying the metal ball back towards its owner.

Krieg was too slow to do more than shift from a smirk to a snarl as it struck him dead-on. The commodore was forced back, his armour dented from the added strength Luffy carried. With a sploosh, Krieg found himself in the water, furry clear by the veins in his eyes.

Forgoing any thought or rationale, the man's temper ran loose, compelling him to reach another fragment of his former flagship to continue to fight with brute force. Luffy leapt forward to meet him, landing on a section of the stern, with a serious look on his face.

Everyone looked on, caught up in the thrill of the face-off between captains. Sanji especially was engrossed. 'Still can't wrap my head around that kid's elastic attacks. Nor his attitude or sheer focus on beating this guy on his own position of that wreaked shi-'

Brouuuunnggg! Sanji's mind went blank, knocked forward head-over-head from behind. Pearl stood upright, smirking at his own cheap shot.

"The fool lost sight of where he was and failed to even notice an attack from behind. Such an imbecile."

"Pearl, what the hell!" Gin snarled at the man. "I owe that man my life. Don't go laying a hand on him again. If Sanji just walks away, it'll take all the fight outa these cooks, and the Don'll have his new ship."

"Hahahahahahaha! And of what importance could that hold?" the pale man neered, jeering at Gin's notion of honour. "You know very well the captain despises such morals. And-"

"NO!" a cry of pure fear froze both officers. Staring over to its source, they found Luffy standing tall, while the Commodore was grasping at

a massive spike flail, sunk in the collar of his armour. Krieg fell to his knees, his eyes wide and laced with tears while he stared up at Luffy. "My-my-my-my....I surrender!" Dropping his weapon, Krieg folded his hands, begging at Luffy. "I have no chance against someone who can get through my Wooze-Armour. And none of my weapons can get through rubber. Please... please....please let me leave alive!"

Everyone reacted to the pathetic display before them. The cooks jeered at the man, while his own subordinates felt lost and betrayed. The man strong enough to kill each of the Krieg Pirates himself, ruling by fear, was seen to be consumed by it all from his failed armour.

"You don't wanna fight anymore?" Luffy asked. "Okay. Just get lost," he shrugged.

"Luffy, no! It's gotta be a trick!" Ussop cried out.

"Yeah, Krieg's infamous for pulling tricks like this. Don't believe him at all, Straw Hat!" Patty chimed in, trying to remove Naruto from the wall. Luffy turned to them, his face blank.

"But he said that-"

Brmmmm!-Brmmmm!

Gin and Pearl both fell, as the gunshots rang through the crowd. Luffy looked on, as did Naruto, to see both men fall. Before the Straw Hat to the source of their murderer... Don Krieg.

The man's face was heartless and unflinching. The sight of his stone face behind two smoking pistols filled Luffy's vision.

Stoic at the sight of his officers, Krieg spoke. "Those two aren't getting me anywhere. I've got no use for someone that unreliable the burn something I take, or idiots that put mercy or honour above victory. Both of you are fired," the man smugly declared.

"You, you mean bastard," Naruto snarled. "Now I need to beat you up for Kakashi-sensei!" The Genin sprang to his feet and took off at a sprint towards Krieg, with righteous anger.

"Naruto, stand down." And immediately that's precisely what Naruto did, at Luffy's command.

Turning around, Naruto found Luffy's face shadowed by the hat. The captain strode up to him, then one hand rose to his head, grasping the straw hat. Slowly, he removed it, then planted it down on Naruto's head.

"Don't let any harm come to my treasure Naruto," Luffy declared. "That hat means more to me than my own life. Don't let any bastards here scratch it."

Naruto couldn't move. 'What... what is this feeling from Captain Luffy's voice. Nobody's ever sounded that mad or heartless.' Beside him, Luffy's hand curled into a fist.

While Krieg faced him with apathy. "You even have the gall to claim a worthless piece of straw more valuable than the One Piece itself! Or the glory and power of the Pirate King! You really are nothing but an insult to all true pirates!" he taunted Luffy, from a face curled with pure superiority and conceit.

The raven-haired, rubber man brought both hands together, cupping a fist in his hand. "You," cracking one knuckle as he spoke. "Shot," another crackle, "your," a third, "own. Men." Luffy brought the other hand up, while a strong breeze was gathered between him and Krieg. "They were loyal and dedicated, but you threw them aside over just a different idea."

Then he met Krieg, with a look of pure anger in his gaze.

"Ha," Krieg scoffed. "Men! Clear out the Baratie or face the consequences!" Emboldened with desperation over their captain's actions, the remnants of his whittled crew attacked. The cooks rush

to meet the pirates, Ussop stole pot-shots at the group with his exploding stars and hard-shot. Naruto rushed over to his teacher, kicking aside anyone near him before making clones to drag Sanji to safety and holding tight to the straw hat he'd been entrusted with. While they passed Gin, a groan was heard from the man-demon. Naruto glanced at him briefly, before dragging him as well with pity in his eyes. Soon both men were beside Zeff, who knelt to check their injuries.

"Hmm. If that Pearl-bastard had hit Sanji any higher, it would have killed him. Probably tried for a rabbit-punch[1] but aimed too high. Eggplant just has to sleep it off," Zeff declared, concerned for his protégée.

"Chef Zeff, Gin is still alive!" Naruto called out. Sure enough, the man-demon was only semi-conscious, as Krieg missed any vital spots on his body.

"Carne! Get the med kit and patch up that man's wound until we can remove the bullet!" Zeff ordered his man.

"Yes, Chef. Heh, good thing we thought to add some stuff to treat bullet wounds from any difficult customers some months back," the cook acknowledged, rushing inside.

While Carne complained, Naruto prompted Gin into a sitting position. "I'm... sorry... Naruto..."

Even now, the man's pride compelled him to stay awake and follow his personal code.

"I'm sorry... for all'u this..."

"Shut up!" Naruto told him. "Krieg's the one at fault, not you! He chose to attack us when he promised not to. And he even shot you after the effort you made to save him!" The genin held his furry in two shaking fists, fixing Gin with an angry glare. "Why do you follow that man! He doesn't care about you, or any other members of his crew.

That can't be the kind of leader to follow. A true leader puts his crew and his comrades ahead of everything, even his goals or missions! What is it about Krieg that makes you want to follow him! There's no reason for him to shoot you!"

Gin's head sunk down. "There is." Naruto stiffened at the tone in Gin's voice.

"I've let my captain down. I was useless to him and in the way. Krieg... he's the strongest man around. The one who can get victory in his grasp no matter what's in his way. I couldn't fill the role he wanted. So I'm useless to anyone."

Those words struck a cord in Naruto's mind. Gasping, he recalled someone else...

"Krieg's my captain," Gin continued, "and to any man who turns pirate, nothing can be more absolute than the captain's word or goals. You hesitate to follow an order, you question the captain's goals, that just brings ruins to the whole crew."

"That's the simple truth. And more than that, Krieg is the strongest man I've met. If I fail the captain at all, then I've got no right to live. I'm useless. Just an unnecessary burden that would've failed the Don again."

Naruto couldn't move, as another set of words echoed in his mind. "This day has shown that I am no longer of any use to Zabuza-sama... It was unnecessary... I am a tool to be used towards Zabuza-sama's ambitions and aspirations. To be used at his will... I have failed you Zabuza. I am like a weapon that has been broken and of no further use."

Haku's silhouette cast over Gin's in Naruto's eyes. He found himself turning to face Krieg, the heartless commodore had wrapped himself in a tarp, covered with spikes, smirking from behind his weapon as Luffy charged for him, ignoring Sanji's protest. The black-haired devil-kid duct forward, unhesitating, to drive his own fist through the

spikes and smash Krieg's face. Leaving the observers stunned, and filling Naruto with purpose.

"You're wrong., Naruto spoke to Gin, grasping the hat entrusted to him. Then he turned back to face Gin with tears of anger on his face. "Krieg's the one who failed you!" Naruot exclaimed. "What good is a leader or a captain that just kills his own men instead of working with them! I had a friend who thought the same as you do and he died. He did it taking an attack through his heart that would have killed his leader. That leader never murdered him over a disagreement!"

Naruto threw one figure towards the clash between captains.

"If Krieg was a great captain, why hasn't he won already?" Gin tried answering, but Naruto didn't wait. "If he was a real leader, how did everyone under his command die at the Grand Line? If he was so amazing, why would he throw away someone as strong and loyal as you?"

Blazing cerulean eyes met Gin's bewildered face. "Krieg is nothing but a weak coward, one that's lower than scum. In my home... breaking laws or rules is one thing, and failing to obey orders means a person is scum. But killing or betraying your own comrades and men. That makes you lower than scum!"

"In my village our leader is called the Hokage. The Hokage is always putting the lives of their people and their ninjas before themselves! They are the best of the best in our village, and all of them have died in battle, to ensure their men and their people would be safe!"

Zeff was listening very closely now, while Gin could only choke, and Naruto's tirade was far from finished. "My sensei, Kakashi, would put himself on the line to protect anyone under his command. And because they knew that they did the same and looked after each other. Beating anyone who came across them! Zeff looks after his men, and they look after him! How does Krieg measure up to that at all! He's just a weak idiot who just fakes hazing strength and doesn't know the real value of people at all!"

Most of the cooks and pirates had stopped fighting, hearing Naruto's cries. Though Luffy and Krieg were too engrossed in their fight to notice.

"Y... yer... yer..." Gin shook his head between trying to force words out from his mouth. "Don Krieg gave me a place and a role when I had nowhere and nothing to go to. He's stronger than any of us," the fired pirates persisted. "He's always succeeding in any goal he sets his eyes on. I'll give him my life, should I have to."

"Why," Naruto growled through clenched teeth, "would you do that if he values your life like it's nothing! If you want to die for someone's greatness, it should be for somebody who values your life and your sacrifice!" Naruto pleaded.

Gin grit his teeth, forcing a lid on doubts that he wanted to deny from surfacing in his mind. 'Dammit... stop shaking,' he bit at himself after noticing one trembling fist. 'Krieg's strength and leadership is what I believe in. It's undeniable and-'

Gin's eyes turned towards his captain, where Krieg stood panting amidst dozens of spent weapons. Krieg's Wooze armour was now littered with cracks and missing fragments, while Luffy stood burnt, bruised, cut and with dozens of narrow stakes stuck in his skin. yet the unarmed and unarmoured one just continued staring down Krieg as the Commodore conjoined both shields, forming a long, armoured spear.

"Why Won't You Just Fall Already!" Krieg's desperate voice rang, as he reared back to strike Luffy again. Gin watched on as Luffy braced his legs, and rear back his own arm. Instead of ducking or dodging, Luffy met the spear with his fist and got engulfed by an explosion.

"What is that idiot doin'-?" Gin's cry was cut off as Luffy's arm shot through the smoke, nailing Krieg in his chest. The Don reeled from the impact as the smoke hung around Luffy. Dissipating, it revealed the other Captain coloured black with soot and his clothes burnt, but still strong and fixing Krieg with a glare of anger and loathing.

"How can he do that!?" came Sanji's voice. Naruto and Gin finally noticed he was awake and staring towards the very scene they had witnessed. "There's no way that boy can take much more. That spear is way too powerful."

"No, you're wrong." Zeff's voice called the attention of all three to him. "Even with a hundred thousand more weapons, that boy can bring Krieg to his knees. Because he doesn't know fear." The old pirate folded his arms, as Luffy took another hit, driving him to the ground. Krieg relaxed, thinking the fight had ended. Until Luffy stood up again.

"Stand or fall," Zeff continued. "Life or death. In a struggle for your existence, you cannot have even the slightest bit of fear. Let that grip you, and anything you have will be lost. That kid out there. When he's fighting, he's not afraid of anything. Not even death."

Sanji could hear his own teeth grinding in his ear. Naruto's eyes remained on Zeff, filled with wonder. Gin's doubts were clear on his face. Even Ussop had inched over to join the group.

"That crewmate of his that challenged Mihawk," Zeff reminded them. "Both him and this Monkey D. Luffy share the same fearlessness in any battle they encounter. Even when suffering or if defeat is all their eyes can see. Is it just instinct, or all a plan? We'll know soon if this captain will live like his first mate. Krieg is strong to an extent, and he might have more pirates at his command than anyone else before him. He may have terrible weapons that cause mass destruction."

"But he will never have that kid's heart. That is a captain worth following." Zeff finished his speech, leaving deep impressions on those assembled. All of whom turned their eyes back towards the captains.

"Keep doing it. Keep throwing that spear and your useless strength at me," Luffy challenged his opponent. "It doesn't matter how many times you hit me. I'll just hit back harder and harder until you go down. Your weapons might be strong, but you've got no strength to

use them at all. They won't bring you victory at all, only real strength can do that!"

"You....son of a bitch! Weak!" depravity was clear on Krieg's face as he shouted. "I am Don Krieg, the strongest in all these Seas! Strength isn't only one part of winning! There are plenty of ways to kill someone by finding the right way to do it! And I'll show you why! Men get your masks!"

"No!" a pirate shouted. "Not the HM5!" But Krieg's didn't listen, disassembling his own spear, and yanking a golden mask to his own face. His crew painted, painting a clear mural to the cooks and Straw Hats of what was coming next. Many cooks grew angry, accusing Krieg of using a coward's weapon.

Zeff began ordering the cooks to dive into the sea, to wait out the gas. Ussop ran around, grabbing masks from nearby defeated enemies for himself and his friends. Soon Johnny and Yosaku snatched their own from fallen pirates. Naruto took one, as did Zeff and Sanji, while Gin pulled out his own.

"Luffy, here, catch!" the coward tossed one to Luffy, who was scrambling halfway back to the Fins. He stretched out an arm to catch it. But Krieg wouldn't stand that.

"Not on your life!" Krieg shot the mask out of the air, just as Luffy landed on a fin, and released the gas.

"No-!" Luffy was shocked to find a mask shoved over his face. Gin felt the same sensation, having simply grasped his mask, hesitant to wear it.

The poisonous purple cloud enveloped the fins. Cooks ducted beneath the waves to escape it, while some of the slower ranks of Krieg's own men caught a lung-full. The Foul-Play, murderous Commodore didn't care, grinning as he anticipated the cloud's dispersal. Sure that he would see the lifeless bodies of Gin and

Straw Hat at least. But when the death-filled cloud finally lifted, that was not the case.

"No!" Luffy wailed, dropping his mask. Gin was broken, hyperventilating at the sight before him. "Nnnnn-n-n-Naruto!-huhh-Your mask! And-huh-hhh-mine!-huh-huh-huh"

The mask shoved over Luffy's face had been Naruto's. Then boy blonde ninja had turned to Gin, forcing the mask over the gaunt man's face. Leaving himself without. He had held his breath as long as he could, but the cloud outlasted him. Now he was on the ground, coughing violently from a face pale with a sickly blue tint.

"Naruto! Naruto!" Luffy lifted him by the shoulders, panicky. "Come on, speak to me!"

"Little bro!" Yosaku and Johnny exclaimed, rushing forward to help. Soon he was in Johnny's arms, hurried inside the restaurant with Sanji right behind them.

"Hurry Patty, get an oxygen tank for him, and any antibiotics we have!" the sous chef commanded. The burly man rushed off to do just that. Zeff hurried inside as well, worry etched over his face.

Gin looked on, unable to move. Barely digesting Naruto's sacrifice. 'That's twice he's saved my life.'

"GuHaHaHaHaHaHa! Foolish child," Pearl's tone rang over the fins. he was on his feet again with a mask on his face. Somehow, he remained alive from Krieg's shot as well. Proving the man truly lacked marksmanship with anything smaller than explosives.

"Giving up his safety for an enemy truly is a hallmark of stupidity. You truly want to save him?" the fool taunted Luffy. "He's already beyond dead to have inhaled that nasty gas. Letting him die is the best course to take should he aid an enemy so readily. GuHaHaHaHaHaHa!" the round man jeered, raising his arms for drama, head thrown back.

The next instant he was finished. The armour the man expressed such pride in was shattered. Another strike connected with his face from a solid iron ball, attached to Gin's tonfa's as the Man-Dead nailed him to the ground.

"Shut your mouth and leave it there, Pearl." He snarled at the pompous oaf. Standing over him, had Gin been able to kill with his eyes, Pearl would have been deeper than 12 ft. under. "You're my enemy now, for my honour's sake."

Turning back to face Luffy, a pair of eyes filled with purpose met the Straw Hat's black irises. "Captain Luffy. I owe Naruto my life twice over now. While Sanji and that old man take care of him. I'd proudly stand beside you in his place for this battle."

Gin kept Krieg in his periphery. While most of his former crew were shocked and fearful over how Gin was now against them.

"Gin. Bastard-Krieg is mine. leave him, and mow down any you see. And you..." Luffy's voice aimed at Krieg, soft, shadowed, and murderous....

"You attack this place after they give you food. You shot a loyal crewmate that would do anything for you. And..." the captain's arms shook with rage. His hair lifted, showing the fury and conviction that promised pure destruction. "You. Hurt. My nakama. Your ass is mine." Luffy pledged. "You're not sailing away from here."

Krieg simply glared, reassembled his battered spear and levelled the point at Luffy. "You really are an insult to all true Pirates. A crew is meant to obey their captain without question or hesitation, and propel them towards the goals set by the captain regardless," Krieg declared.

"Men can be replaced, and their loss would only show how useless they have become. Spending effort to worry about something other than their consistent strength is nothing but a waste. And your powers aren't gonna change this either, not once I find the trick to

end you, and here surrounded by the water you'll never walk away alive. After I beat you and take this ship, then I'll prove that even further by chasing down that Hawkeyes and finding the trick or tactic that'll beat him and force that fop to grovel at my feet." The commodore pledged with a smirk on his face. He was drunk on his own superiority and incapable of learning from a past mistake.

Luffy leapt forward, twisting around to send his arm back, and punching down towards Krieg. An explosion erupted, from where the captain's fist met the War-spear. Luffy didn't care, landing on a chunk of ship 10 m. meters from Krieg. His other arm already cocked back for another hit. Krieg snarled at the man's daring, taking aim at the oncoming limb.

'Rubber or not, I'll take his arm and less him with one less.' He planned. But when they met, Luffy's hit shattered the spearhead before the explosives could blow. Krieg roared in awe and fear as his one-ton weapon, even the shields at its head, shattered from Luffy's hit. Another fist came, striking Krieg in the face with the full power of Luffy's passion for his crew.

The Commodore took three more punches, before diving for the water, where Luffy couldn't follow. The Straw Hat looked around, trying to be ready when Krieg made a move, while Gin and the few cooks not with Naruto assembled together. None of the Krieg pirates attack. Judging that going close to the restaurant with Gin standing in their way would be suicide, or dumbfounded by the sight of Krieg getting manhandled.

Luffy's makeshift raft exploded from beneath him. "Damnit, more explosives!" the Rubber-man cursed. Still, flowing on instinct, Luffy rode the momentum from the blast upwards then looped one long limb around what was left of one mast. Flinging himself around it, the captain landed back on another raft and eyed the water carefully. Sure enough, when Luffy didn't plunge in, Krieg had to resurface. The moment his head broke the surf to fill his empty lungs, Luffy grabbed him. Krieg was yanked from the water, then seized by a second hand as Luffy threw his head back.

"Gum-gum: Bell!" The head butt stunned Krieg and knocked away several teeth. When he could see again, the face of the Devil himself was there; Luffy's infuriation over his Nakama's condition could even terrify Gods, all of it focused on Krieg.

"Gum-Gum: BAZOOOKAAAA!" The impact reduced his Wooze-Armour to fragments. Taking the last of his weapons with it. The man was defenceless and unable to fight, but Luffy wasn't gone yet.

Before Krieg could hit the water, Luffy grabbed his shirt with one arm and twisted his mid-section around several times over. "Gin! Knock this bastard so hard he doesn't wake up for a month! For Naaaruuutooo!" The Man-Demon hesitated. He realized what Luffy had planned. Krieg was yanked back, twisting with Luffy's body, taunt as loaded spring.

Immediately, the bastard was sent towards the Baratie, flying for some moments.....

Before Gin's tonfa, spurred by Naruto's actions, met his face and chest.

The sound of its impact was sickening, as his chest nearly imploded and the man's face cracked by the impact. Gin held just enough strength to hold the beaten Don in place, before the figure went slack, slipping to the ground without a twitch.

Luffy propelled himself back to the ship, but fatigue caught up to him. Blood loss during the fight and worry for Naruto, his legs went slack on the landing, and Luffy collapsed into the sea.

"Luffy, no!" Ussop's voice came. Gin watched as the nakama sprinted to the water, diving in to help his captain. After hesitating a moment to stare at Don Krieg's defeated form, Gin turned away and dove in after him.

Together, the man and teen brought Luffy to the surface. Sputtering but otherwise alright. The moment he got to the fins, Luffy pushed

them aside and stumbled to his feet.

"I'm not important! Naruto! How is Naruto!" Worry for his crewmate dominated Luffy's mind. Ignoring the gathered pirates and cheers from the cooks, he staggered inside the restaurant.

Zeff met him at the door. "Out of my way," Luffy tried to throw him aside. "Show Naruto to me!"

"He's alright," Zeff announced, holding the battle-weary Luffy still. "We pumped some oxygen into his body, and Kakashi left before gathering a pouch of supplies they came with." Standing aside, Luffy could see his young crewmate lying on a table, with his chest still rising with every breath. Sanji was beside him, while Luffy's precious treasure was still on Naruto's head.

"Among their stuff," Zeff explained, "were some basic antidotes for just this kind of situation. "It slowed the poison through his system. Truth be told, I think he's actually recovering from it much faster than normal humans should be," Zeff observed.

Ussop dropped to the ground, sagging with relief, while Luffy wrestled free and soon he was standing over Naruto. Footfalls came from behind them, and Gin strode before them to stand beside Usopp. The man's face was harder than iron as he nodded over at Zeff, then approached Luffy.

"I'm sorry," he spoke, with deep shame. "All this... it happened from my choices... besides attacking you and Sanji. Naruto could have been killed because ah me and-"

"NO," Luffy answered but was still staring at his Nakama. "At the beginning, Zeff said people make their own choices. You made yours to save your captain and crew, and he made his to attack. Naruto also chose to save your life and mine." Turning his face, Luffy answered Gin with only the simple truth and conveyed what he believed.

On the table, Naruot was stirring. He didn't wake up, so Luffy knelt while Gin kept standing, swallowing past a lump of guilt. 'I'd be dead now if it weren't for him. Now that I'm not with Krieg. My own honour is all I have left, and I owe a big chunk of it to that boy.'

"Uh, Gin? Why are you still standing here?" Usopp realized.
"Shouldn't, I mean, what about all those guys out there?"

"They ain't around no more," Gin answered him. "Wherever they ran to, I ain't got no spot speaking anything at 'em. And after Luffy and me destroyed Krieg, they ain't gonna be rising any more hell around here."

"That, and I'm staying 'till I know Naruto's outa the woods."

"Gin." Luffy was back on his feet. Turning around, he took two septs back to the grey-clad ex-pirate. The serious look on Luffy's face was back, enough that Gin felt fear but wasn't affected by it. "Straw Hat Luffy. What happened here was from my account. I'll take whatever wrath you decide, after what came to Naruto."

Luffy fixed him with a powerful glare and spoke three, simple words.

"You fight good. Join my crew."

That was not what Gin expected. The Man-Demon barely moved, before his eyes were bulging in their sockets. "You wha... can yah say that again, Straw Hat?"

The Rubber-man dropped his arms to his sides. "Join my crew. Like Naruto and I said, you're a great crewmate, just got stuck with a horrible captain. Plus you're real strong and fought with me already. Come with us, it'll be fun."

Gin was floundering for several moments. "Ah..." then he noticed was back on his feet. "Is yer captain thinking right?"

"Well Luffy said it, so it's true" the coward answered him. "You fought with us already, once. And I warn you. Saying no won't be worth the trouble. Luffy won't leave your side until the answer turns into a yes."

"You honestly, aftah everything that's happened. You want me as an underling?"

"I don't like that word," Luffy announced. "I have nakama. Friends. Not unwerlings. Everyone's equal on my crew. Heck, they even hit me sometimes when I do something stupid. And I need strong and dependable people to become the King of the Pirates. You can do the same, and I won't order you to do something against your honour."

The more he heard, the more Gin felt a mix of confusion and desire. 'I've neva met such a carefree leader. But, he's proven to be better than Krieg ever was, in every way...'

"Oh, yeah!" Luffy shouted up. "Gin. The one thing you need to have to join us is a dream. A goal, or something you want to reach in your life. Mine is to become the King of the Pirates. Ussop wants to be a brave warrior of the seas. What is your dream?"

Gin was surprised, before thinking back on what he wanted to accomplish. "I... I was only there for a short time. I saw things I can't help but feel are beyond me. But after seeing you, Don Luffy. I want to sail on the Grand Line again. It don't make any sense. But I wanna go back there, for you and all the friends I lost there. Not run from my dream like a coward just 'cause I'm too held back to accomplish it. My dream is to follow a Captain I can be proud standin' beside."

Conviction grew in his voice with every word. "I accept yer offer, Don Luffy."

Luffy grinned at the answer, nodding at his new crewmate. While Sanji watched the entire exchange. "Hey, Straw Hat." Luffy turned about, facing the cook.

"You really do care about your crewmates, don't you. And you value their dreams just as much as your own?" he asked, while Zeff grinned from the sidelines.

"Yep. I'd never turn my back on any of them. And I want a strong guy like you to join too. So, are you done saying no or what?" he bluntly replied.

Sanji turned to face Naruto. Before glancing around the restaurant and thinking about his own dreams. And recalling some vague ghosts dancing on the edge of his consciousness, filled only with pain and rejection from being "weak."

"I... I've made my choice," Sanji replied. "I need to look after Naruto if he's going with you as well. Plus, Sakura-chan and Nami-swan are on your crew as well. And I'm ready to fulfil a dream of my own. To find the All Blue, a place where fish from all four Blues swim together. It's only a legend, a rumour, but I want to find it."

"I'll join your crew as a cook." Now Luffy really was celebrating, as were the rest of the staff shouting with glee at the idea of Sanji leaving.

"Well, glad that has been settled." A new voice came behind them. Whirling about, everyone saw Kakashi standing behind them. Krieg's body lumped over his shoulder while the remainder of his crew was nowhere to be found.

"I showed up just as the Krieg pirates were starting to rally. Apparently, Don Krieg wasn't beaten since he stood up and began rambling about never losing, despite being unconscious. So, I put him down and sent the remainder away on a boat while Luffy was talking with Gin."

The Jonin strolled over lazily and offered his hand. "Welcome to-NARUTO!"

Ussop, Gin, Zeff, Sanji and Luffy had been blocking his view of the wounded Genin. On sight, Kakashi was beside him instantly. It was a hassle as they explained Naruto had inhaled some poison but seemed to be recovering steadily. Kakashi remained serious, deeply worried about his student. While fixing Gin with a demanding stare.

A moment passed before Kakashi stroked Naruto's hair and came to a decision.

"Alright. First, I'm a shadow-clone. Like the ones Naruto uses all the time. He real me sent me running back here because we figured out where Nami is heading toward. But I have a request to make from you, Captain Luffy."

The Straw Hats, Johnny and Yosaku gathered around Kakashi. Listening to him describe Sakura's memory of Nami's reaction to Arlong's poster and his own efforts to triangulate where she was heading with the Going Merry. Johnny and Yosaku confirmed her story and gave some of their ideas about the Seven Warlords and Arlong's association with one of them.

"I see," Kakashi responded. "Captain. The real me, Sasuke and Sakura should reach Cocoyashi Village by tonight. Even if Nami isn't there, I should be able to learn something about her and Arlong. From there, piecing together more of her past will probably give some inkling into where she's heading. But first."

He turned to face Naruto, resting a hand on the sleeping boy. "I want Naruto taken to a hospital and ensure that the poison is neutralized before heading into an unknown situation. My other students and I can investigate Cocoyashi village quietly and learn more if they have a couple of days. Would you mind if we head to a nearby town before joining up with them?"

"What! But Nami-swan could be in some kind of trouble! We should chase after her right now and save that beautiful damsel from the horrors that befall her!" Sanji declared.

"And what about Big-bro Zoro!" "Yeah, we need to know if he's okay from those wounds he got from Mihawk!" Yosaku and Johnny protested.

Luffy thought for a moment, before looking at Naruto. "I wanna make sure Naruto is okay too. And Kakashi can look after Sasuke, Sakura and Zoro. If Nami is in some kind of trouble, they can still help her. We'll go after them once Naruto is okay."

Kakashi felt his respect for Luffy rise. "Thank you, Captain. Also, Krieg probably needs to be put away for everything he's done," turning towards Johnny and Yosaku.

"Now, pirates turning in another pirate doesn't really sound very ideal. But after Krieg left Naruto in this state, I don't like the idea of casting him off to the world. Perhaps the pair of you could turn him into the Marines and collect his bounty from them while we're in the town. After all, you did participate in the fight and were inadvertently crucial to learning where Nami went."

Kakashi shrugged, "Some compensation certainly seems fair."

Luffy grinned. "Okay. Tomorrow, we head to a town so Naruto can get better and give Krieg to the Marines. Then go to Comoyoshi after Nami. But first." His crewmates, old and new, were ready to act on their captain's orders.

Only for said captain to fall back, rest his arms under his head, and shut his eyes. "Sleepy. That fight left me pretty tired. Night..."

He was snoring in seconds. "Are you kidding?" Sanji gawked.

End.

Please Read, Review and Vote on who should get the Fight Arlong in the next Arc.

I want to give Swords of the Gods credit for making Gin as a Straw Hat such an appealing idea to me, along with becoming the inspiration for this story to be written.

I sincerely promise that no canon crewmates are going to be replaced or omitted. But I am open to having more characters become permanent crewmates under Luffy's flag. I also hope you found Luffy's confrontation with Krieg was gripping and intense.

Back to the beginning, I enjoy keeping different characters balanced, rather than stagnant or excessively bashing them. Here, Sakura was given to time shine, by making useful contributions to a mission (go ahead and laugh). I do admit her character prior to Shippuden is very aggravating from much BS baggage she carries, her utter lack of growth or skills compared to her teammates, and the lack of applying any of her productive qualities to her job as a Ninja.

The only real positive traits she had before training with Tsunade were her chakra control and her intellect outside of battle strategies or combat scenarios. This is one case where the latter can be applied, recalling details she observed about someone she has spent nearly a week in close company with, finding inconsistencies, and piecing them together based on logic and deduction.

While regarding her other traits... they will take some intense shock therapy, or a powerful role model to snap the many flawed conceptions that she has.

Path of Life

Chapter 11: The Path of Life:

Farwell's, Arrivals and Encounters.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please vote in a Review!

"Hey Sanji, Naruto! Hurry up already! The rest are waiting to meet up and we have to get ridda Stupid-Krieg! Come on!" Monkey D. Luffy's voice rang out towards the restaurant. Gin was packing away supplies given by the cooks in the compact storage of Sanji's boat. While Ussop strode up towards their captain.

"Luffy. Just give those two a little more time, alright. I mean, Sanji spent years here and probably has a lot to bring, or some goodbyes to say. And Naruto's still recovering from Don Krieg's poison gas. Let them move slowly, and maybe Kakashi will solve the problems with Nami so any danger is gone once we meet up with him." the pragmatic coward hoped.

"No way, that's boring." Luffy's refusal came. Sanji and Naruto didn't notice, one glancing around his old room while the other was dealing with several goodbyes from the cooks.

"You really have to leave like this, kid!?" Patty complained. "I mean, all of you were good to work with, but Sasuke was a little broody and

Kakashi was just a lazy bum who got in the way of me hitting anyone. Sakura was great at organizing and she made customers happy! But you are amazing, whether in the kitchen or in the dining room Naruto!"

The burly man roped Naruto up in a bear hug, with others joining him to praise Naruto all the while from his hard work to the popular sexy-jutsu. Naruto himself could only blush, trying to shake off their attention.

"Awwwww. I-It was nothing, Patty! You guys were awesome to work with, ya know. And learning how to cook from Zeff was so cool. I'm really glad we became friends, and I'll never forget any of you, ever!" Naruto promised, trying to push down the strange feelings in his chest. Somewhere between a tight pain and weird happiness, these emotions were pushing for tears to reach his eyes. But the boy just shoved them aside to continue smiling at everyone.

"You can't ever forget us with this, kid." One of the staff shouted over. He was setting up a camera in the corner of the restaurant. Then rose his voice. "Everyone gather around, with Naruto up front! He's taking this photo and three more to Kakashi, Sakura and Sasuke to remember us by forever!"

A chorus of cheers followed, with everyone moving over to the camera. But Naruto protested that Zeff had to be there too, so it was put aside while the rest searched for their boss.

The old Pirate had just offered Luffy his old Logbook, but the Straw Hat had declined despite Gin's protests over how important such a treasure could be to their survival.

"Don Luffy. Ah argued against Krieg taking it by force, along with the Old Man's Restaurant. This is quite an offer, and it could be the difference between all ah the crew living or dying."

But Luffy just grinned. "Nah, that's what bastard-Krieg would do and I don't wanna to be like him. We'll find our own way once we get

there."

Gin nodded his head, while Zeff grinned at the reply.'

Now, he had been looking for Sanji, but Naruto mattered enough to him to pose for the photo. He kept a stern look, even with Naruto on his shoulders with both arms raised, throwing 'Pace' signs at the camera.

Sanji was in his room, packing away everything that mattered enough for him to take with him. His eyes took one last sweep around the room, filled with old memories that were the sweetest of his life. The young man couldn't take his eyes off a single photo of himself and Zeff, and all the days spent in the company of the pirate.

'The geezer was berating me there after dropping the plate to look at women.' 'In that chair, he watched as I ate down a cake that had baking soda instead of baking powder. That foamy taste in my mouth was horrible, but it had to be done.' 'Over there he tried to fire me for the first time before I caught on and swore this day wouldn't ever come....'

Lowering his head and lifting a bag to his shoulder, the cook nodded at the best time of his life thus far and left to start a new chapter.

'I always promised myself that one day I would go to the Grand Line. Naruto and the others still need to learn about Black Leg style. And I can't exactly trust Kakashi to look after Sakura or any other women who join them, since Monkey D. Luffy is too much of an airhead and the others don't give women the right kind of respect.' The cook pledged to himself.

Before his eyes turned to hearts. "And of course, I need to find and save Nami from herself. Oh the horrors which compelled her to leave. I pledge to face them then comfort her with my full, unwavering, undivided and unrelenting affection. Something I hope she will eagerly reciprocate!" Perverted thoughts churning in mind, Sanji's legs become noodles, moving out towards the deck.

Ussop and Gin heard his thoughts aloud and saw the hopeless pervert in various windows of the Baratie. "Does he do that often?" the Man-demon asked his new crewmate.

"Only whenever Nami was around," the sniper shrugged. "Looks like we're gonna have to keep that idiot focused once we catch up to her, or safe from any women that want to pick a fight because he might be worse than helpless against them."

With a nod, Gin turned back to his job. Johnny and Yosaku were aboard too, impatient to get going and see if Zoro was alright. Luffy watched as Naruto and Sanji moved through the front doors towards their boat.

The rest of the cooks watched their departure, while Patty and Carne tried one last surprise attack on Sanji.

"PAY BAAAACK!" "HERE IT COMES, SANJI!" Both jumped him from above. Yet only touched empty air; Sanji pushed Naruto's head low, shifting himself forward and around. Two solid upper kicks to their jaws and the cooks were sent flying back.

"Well that was just pretty stupid," Naruto said, Sanji guiding him to the boat. "Not like I'd ever do anything like that to Sasuke."

The blondes, one a man and the other a boy, nearly reached the waiting nakama ahead. Before a voice stopped both in their tracks.

"Sanji... Naruto...." Zeff's voice cut through them. "Take care of each other."

Both of his students, one across years the other only a month, were stifling at those words. Never once had Zeff used Sanji's name with such affection, nor had Naruto heard someone so filled with pride and concern for him over the 12 years of his life.

The scene that came could melt any heart, Sanji throwing his head to the ground and pouring his heart to the man who was a father in

all but name to the cook. While Naruto ran back, up the walls to throw his arms around the chef.

"I... I will! And I'll never forget you or any of the people, the fun, the work, the lessons or your kicks here at all Oji-san!" Naruto declared. Unbeknownst to any, using the same words and affections that Hiruzen had received from the boy, and Zeff earned from his fair treatment and acknowledgement towards the Jinchuriki.

It took ten minutes to pry Naruto's arms from the chef. With eyes that were unable to meet all the respect and acknowledgement given by the cooks, Naruto kept his head down as he moved aboard the boat. Sanji's head rose, to see Zeff whipping tears from his own wrinkled eyes in pride and pain at his protégé's departure.

With the last farewells made, Johnny and Yosaku cast off the boat and began to sail for a nearby island. Soon, the restaurant dropped out of sight, and Gin walked over to their new cook. "Hey Sanji? It might not be my place to pry. But what did that cook do to earn such reverence from yah?"

Sanji held Gin's gaze with a shadow covering his eyes. "Can you wait until we meet up with the others? Then I can give that story to everyone."

Gin held respect in his gaze, before nodding at Sanji's request. While Luffy stood tall and proud at the bow.

"Alright, men! We've got two new nakama, and still need to get another back! Let's get to an island to turn over Bastard-Krieg," gesturing at the bound, gagged, knocked-out waste of space on the boat.

"... then, we head to Cocoyoshi village to get Nami, Zoro, Kakashi, Sasuke and Sakura all together!"

Sakura screeched. They had been sailing for some hours, Sasuke combing the horizon while Kakashi navigated and Sakura kept close watch over Zoro. Kakashi had given one gasp in that time but told her and Sasuke nothing was lost or amiss.

"Sea Monster! It's pro-gggrrrrrrrrr-from the Grrrrand Line," Zoro answered, trying to grasp his one remaining sword while the other hand clenched over his wounds.

"Yeah... Sea Kings. I only heard rumours about them, mostly, until running into a few here and there. Apparently, the Grand Line is littered with them. One of the many reasons that Sea is called a grave-yard. Either the people there, like Mihawk, will kill you. Or the Sea monsters will do the job. Unless you're strong enough to fight them."

"EEEEAAAHHHHHHAAAAHHHHH! IT'S GONNA EAT US!" Sakura cried in hysterics. For a strong hand to cover her mouth.

"Water-style: Giant Vortex jutsu!" Zoro turned his head, while their first sight of a sea-king left the Genin too shocked and terrified to look away.

An oversized vortex of water slammed into the creature's face and knocked the cow aside. Zoro was the picture of bewilderment, at the sight of Kakashi producing an enormous cyclone of water and channelling it towards the beast. The man's left eye was still covered, his hands conjoined, and all attention was focused on where the threat had disappeared to.

"Sakura! You said before that this Arlong is a Fishman. Zoro! Do you know if they could have any connection to that creature?" Kakashi commanded them. Though a question, Kakashi's tone carried a level of command Zoro couldn't help but acknowledge.

"It might be," the swordsman answered. "I know enough about Fishman that they come straight from the Grand Line where a creature like it would have ventured from. Not sure about rumours of Fishmen being able to talk with other fish, but it's possible."

The Jonin nodded, only to hear the water begin to churn....far too constant to be accidental.

The Sea Cow burst forth again, this time eyeing the vessel beneath it, not going for a quick, easy meal.

"Sensei, use a water-jutsu then a lightning one! That might force it to leave us be!" Sakura suggested.

"Perhaps, but I can't cast both at the same time. And neither elements are basic enough for Sasuke to copy and use instantaneously with his own Sharingans. Water-clone jutsu!"

The original created ten spare Kakashi's to materialise from the ocean water. Eight moved forward while two grabbed the oars in the boat.

"Don't stop until you fall apart and approach the island with Cocoyoshi village from the east, wherever an unobserved beach can be found," he instructed, himself.

"Zoro, you're still recovering and too weakened to help against this threat. I'll tie down this creature, then catch up with you."

"No sensei-!"

"Sakura, that is an order," cold, sharp words cut the girl's protests in her throat. Kakashi's posture, voice and eyes all shared the same demeanour. Fixing his Genin with the inapproachable will to have his orders obeyed.

"Wait!" one of his clones called over. "You still have Icha-Icha: Tactics in your pouch! Give it here, we can't let that book become ruined by the water or whatever that Sea Cow could do?"

Everyone Kakashi grew pale at the thought of losing their favourite book. The original quickly drew it from his toolpouch and handed it to one clone then shifted his attention back to the threat. The Sea monster was moving in again, so the Jonin's clones spread out to meet it, the original formed a new jutsu.

'This is a little desperate but will hopefully work!' he hurriedly thought.

"Water style: Pulsing wave jutsu!" Slamming both hands downward, Kakashi sent a pulse of water chakra through the ocean he stood atop. Waves began churning from his hands, pulsing outwards reminiscent of the earth-wave jutsu. Pouring enough power to send the boat dozens of meters away, Kakashi's move did the same with the Sea monster while his clones stood in place, balancing with chakra as the waves flowed beneath them.

Kakashi himself faced the creature, sharply aware of the situation.

'He's a big enemy, but also very slow. Plus, there's no chakra around here, meaning it's not a summoning creature with a cap to its presence.., I don't think I have the kind of physical might to knock him back with taijutsu. Using large-scale lightning jutsu might cause the water itself to become conductive. Any splash from his guy

crashing down could hit me, Zoro, Sasuke or Sakura and leave electric shocks. So that avenue it out.'

The creature emerged again, yet somehow paused at the sight of Kakashi standing on the water. The Jonin cocked his head at the look of surprise in the assailant's eyes. Before it looked around and began to move away.

'That's where I sent the boat!'

"Attack!" Kakashi ordered his clones, while his hand wove together, forming a jutsu.

Each clone drew kunai composed of water and leapt at the creature's face. They splattered immediately after, soaking the creature in water for Kakashi's next attack.

"Lightning style: Thunderbolt!" Several electric charges erupted between the Jonin's fingers, then cast outwards at a very precise target.

"WWWWWGGGGGGGWWWWWAAAAAAAAAAAAA" The cries of pain were loud and deep. The fresh salt water from the clones magnified the electric impact of the attack, leaving parts of the sea monster charred and smoking. Still, it wasn't near enough to hit anything fatal, and eyes of rage cast over the source of its pain.

Now both of Kakashi's eyes were out. "That's right. I'm your opponent. Now, come and get me."

The Jonin's Sharingan found what he sought, then dashed straight towards the sea creature. It dove towards him, yet the Jonin casually evaded the monster, diving beneath the surface.

Once below, Kakashi cast his gaze backwards.

'Good. The creature's taking time to turn around after diving towards me. Time I can use.'

His hands were flying at full speed, straining to focus enough and execute the jutsu without speaking aloud and wasting oxygen.

'Water-style: Water dragon jutsu.' Beneath him, a dense mass of water swirled together, then took the form of a dragon. Hovering above it, Kakashi's left eye had spotted one area of the sea floor, angled with an upward slope. He propelled his jutsu towards that section, not towards the sea monster.

Glance over his shoulder, the Jonin noted that the creature had turned faster than he'd thought; now it was barely 30 meters away. Focusing ahead, he waited for the right timing while measuring his breath carefully. Drawing closer to the sloped ocean floor.

The sea monster was faster, moving closer as the jutsu streamed towards its target. 30 meters....25 meters... 10 meters....

'Now!'

The water-dragon failed, with the jaws of the sea monster wide open! The Sea Cow's maw closed around him and locked tight. The creature was still moving, feeling around the mouthful of seawater for its target. Only for its eyes to wide-

CCGGGRRRRRRRRRRRRWWWGRGRRRRRRRRRR!

Even muffled by the water, a sickening crash was made as the sea monster had driven itself into the ground, head-first. As a bull to a matador, rage had filled its eyes and left no room to notice it was barreling straight for the solid ground.

Stunned, the sea-cow turned about in the water, until the earth began to move. Large masses of the seafloor were shifting beneath the creature centred on its fins. Soon every limb was bound, shackling the creature and keeping the threat anchored to the ocean floor.

Three Kakashi's looked on, keeping their hands pressed on the earth to maintain the jutsu until the Sea Cow was bound to the ground.

Kakashi himself looked on from 20 meters away, in case his gambit failed.

'Earth style: Rock Shelter. This may not be the most ideal as a defensive jutsu, but it'll work to bind down that monster for a while. Now...'

Once the jutsu was complete, the Jonin floated there and watched the sea monster thrash about. The restraints held and it was no longer a threat. Coving his left eye, Kakashi was straining for oxygen and began swimming upwards.

'No... too....far...' he was over 10 meters down and lacking air. Glancing up, the Jonin saw bubbles rising up, nearly forming a rounded staircase.

'Stair....' An idea came to the strategic shinobi, from instinct alone. Kakashi gasped out, channelling chakra to his hands, the same principle for water-walking. Sure enough, he gripped a solid mass and began pulling himself upwards through the water.

In no time, he was almost at the surface. On a reflex he refused to fight, Kakashi ripped off his mask! Breaking the surface, he took a deep, unobstructed gasp for air.

"Huuuuuuuuuhh.....huuuuuhhhh....hhuuuuuhhhh..." The man caught his breath, before looking back on what transpired.

'What... what was that thing? I've only seen summoning animals in the Kage class reach that size. It even had some intelligence.' He thought, with a stone in his gut. Thinking back to his students, and the idea of fighting multiple sea-kings at any one time, the Jonin could only imagine failure at the prospect.

"I thought that some strong allies and myself would be skilled enough to handle anything that we encounter," he muttered, staying on the surface with chakra from practised instinct.

"Or Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura could learn and work together as a team to escape or survive any other threats that we found. If those things really are scattered across this place, the Grand Line. Then perhaps it would be wiser if we waited before trying to go there..." he muttered, silently.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura's call travelled over the water. Immediately, Kakashi fixed his mask and then saw his Genin and Zoro close by. Sasuke vaulted over the side, Sharingan's wide and scanning the water for any trace of the creature that attacked them. The Last Uchiha reached his teacher, before hauling him to his feet and moving back towards the boat.

"I'm alright," Kakashi assured them. "Just a little short on air. I managed to hurt him with a lightning jutsu. Now, that Sea Cow is tied up on the bottom of the sea."

Zoro's eyes grew wide, fighting any sense of reason to disbelieve the Jonin's words. The swordsman had been knocked overboard when Kakashi had threatened Mihawk with his Chidori. After the waves sent the boat away, the Genin had needed more than some time to explain ninjutsu to the swordsman, especially how Kakashi could turn water, lightning and more elements into weapons.

Now Roronoa was feeling more and more eager to keep the ninjas with their crew, and deep trust in his captain's judge of talent and character.

Kakashi's unseen lips drew a line at Sakura and Sasuke's concerns. "Well... I was having a thought... Sakura. Can you record that event in the Voyage Journal?"

The genin answered by face-planting, both of them, straight on the deck. "Guhhahahahaha," with Zoro laughing behind them. "Probably a good idea, Kakashi. Taking a Sea King on your own isn't a feat to be seen every day," Zoro agreed before either could respond.

With a shrug of resignation, Sasuke's eyes returned to their surroundings, focusing only on their destination and a confrontation with Nami. Sakura looked for any distraction and pulled the Voyage Journal from her tool pouch.

As she began to record her sensei's escapade, Kakashi took the time to sit and breathe.

'This isn't good. Within today I've used one Chidori, four shadow clones, dozens of water-clones, one water-dragon, and three simultaneous earth-shelter jutsu. All of those took a number on my chakra. Once we find Cocoyoashi village, Zoro will need to recover from the rest of his wounds. Sasuke, Sakura and I will observe and report. Then wait for Luffy and the others to arrive. Before making any moves.'

One hour later, the boat reached the shoreline of the Conomi Islands. Zoro demanded that he was fine and stood up, dragging their boat up the shoreline to hide it. Kakashi decided arguing wasn't worth the effort and helped him do the same. Soon the boat was left in the trees, and the group began to plan out what to do next.

"Sensei. How do you want us to look for Miss. Nami? This isn't like Tazuna-san's village. We need to stay hidden or inconspicuously, not move around where anyone can spot us." Sakura surmised. It may be reciting a textbook, but her recollection of the principles gave the group somewhere to start.

"We won't learn anything if we just stand around here," Zoro disagreed. "I'm going to explore, see what there is to find." The swordsman strode forward, but Kakashi stopped him.

"No, Zoro-san. This situation is something of an unknown. Walking ahead blind might bring more trouble. We still don't know for absolute certainty if Nami is here. It's only the most plausible case."

The swordsman couldn't move, gripped by Kakashi's tone. The Copy-nin had adopted a mission-focused mindset, completely. One

from a person who had done over a thousand missions, most of them higher-ranked.[1]

"First, we need to make a camp or find somewhere to regroup. That will give us a place to look for the others, and if no one returns, we'll know if they are in a predicament. Otherwise, if things go badly, then we'll have a safe spot to recover at." The Jonin had already taken in their surroundings and had a flexible plan laid out to share with the others.

"This place doesn't have much foliage, and from the short grass or broken branches, it seems people pass through here often. We need to find a cave or an abandoned house to stay in. The boat needs to come with us too, for a quick escape if we need one. Once we find somewhere, you and Sakrua will go and look around overtly, while Sasuke and I take a more subtle, unseen approach."

"Zoro. Both of your swords were broken by Mihawk, meaning only your green hair and earrings can give away your identity as a bounty hunter. I have some hair dye stored away, so you can pass it off as a wanderer with Sakura. Ask around about this place, but do not mention Nami by Nami by name. Understood?"

Sakura, Sasuke and Zoro nodded. With them in agreement, Kakashi moved over to the boat, drawing a storage scroll from his vest. Place it over the boat, Kakashi woven his hands in various signs. In a flash, smoke emerged and the boat was gone from sight.

"What! Kakashi, I thought you wanted to keep that boat for a quick getaway!" Zoro shouted.

"He does," Sasuke replied, with a smug look on his face. "Kakashi sealed the boat into that scroll he placed on top. Ninjas like us can cause physical objects to become coated with chakra and sealed into small loads, for easy transportation."

Zoro blinked at the Uchiha. Then resigned himself. "Walking on water, fighting with elemental powers, eyes that can see things

before they happen, and turning large objects into ink. Sure, why not add to it."

Kakashi smiled at the sight, placing it away from the scroll he had used. 'Good thing I wrote up several of these in case we needed them.[2] Also, I suppose it's a good thing I had the forethought to seal away that treasure Captain Luffy had kept on the Merry inside.'

Elsewhere on the sea, the other half of the Straw Hats were cruising towards a nearby Marine base that Gin had designated as the closest. The Man-demon himself stood against the cabin wall, watching his new crewmates. Naruto and Luffy with up at the bow, the smaller boy on the other's shoulders after they had fought together over that seat. Ussop was crouched over his supplies, making new ammunition stars. Krieg was still out cold and guarded by Johnny and Yosaku, while Sanji had gone indoors to make lunch.

Gin was shifting about, unfamiliar with such a carefree group.

'Well, no point in dwelling on it. We're makin' good time and should reach that base soon.'

"Uhh, hey, Gin!" Ussop called over.

"Once we get this base, you should probably hide inside while we turn Krieg over to the Marines. None of us are wanted by the Navy except you, and it might cause some problems. Plus, if you know this base, do you think the officers might try to skim some of Krieg's bounty for themselves?"

Johnny and Yosaku had been listening, "Hey, that's pretty good thinking, big-bro Ussop. And, you are still sure about giving us most of the bounty for this guy? I mean, big-bro Luffy was the one who knocked him down so hard."

"No problem there, Johnny!" Luffy called from the bow. "Money and treasure aren't as big as adventure. And you guys probably need

that money more than we do, and never wouldah beaten Krieg on your own anyways."

Both of the swordsmen collapsed, their spirits low by the truth in Luffy's words. Gin himself nodded, pushing down the flicker of guilt at turning his former boss into prison.

"I agree with ya Ussop, and Ah'll stay below deck when the time comes. And Ah know this base because Krieg was planning to raid it after gittin' a new ship. It's run by a Commodore, "Pristine Principles" Godfrey. The man's known for sticking to regulations and rules. Krieg thought flying a Marine flag and acting to turn himself in would sucker the guy, let Krieg take whatevah he wanted."

"Hagglin' over Krieg's bounty shouldn't be an issue."

Ussop nodded at Gin's assurance, quietly glad since they didn't have Nami around to haggle for a higher price.

BOOOOMMM SPLASH!

"AAAHHHHHH!" "Captain!"

"What's wrong out here!" Sanji exclaimed, bursting through the door. Glancing around he saw nothing off the port side, even as the boat rocked from the waves.

"Bibg-bro Sanji!" Yosaku called over. "That was a cannonball that hit the water off the standard. And it knocked big-bro Luffy overboard!"

"Shit!" the cook cried out. "You and Johnny stay beside Krieg to make sure he doesn't wake up and pull anything on us! I'll grab that Rubbery deadweight."

Yet when Sanji got there, Naruto was climbing aboard with Luffy over his shoulder.

"Hey there, Sanji-senpai! Luffy fell off the boat, but I ran over the water and pulled him out before too long," the blonde explained, with

a thumbs-up.

Nodding at the quick, thinking, Sanji's attention moved to find the source of the explosion. Gin was beside him, looking at the Marine ship a few hundred yards away.

"Damn. Naruto and the Don were looking ahead, while the rest ah us were gathered on the port side. That ship crept up on our blind spot," the experienced Gin observed. While the boat drew closer.

"Chichichichichichichi! Now what has brought such lowly begins as these to my path, here? Interfering with Marine business."

All of the Straw Hats aboard looked up, spotting a line of marines with rifles levelled towards the boat and a single canon on the bow. Behind the line of men, an officer stood under a hood, with rat-like whiskers on his cheeks.

"Hey, why'd you shoot at us! Can you not see what's in front of you!" Naruto called up.

For the marines to smirk at the boy, following their officer's lead.

"I am Marine Captain Nazumi," the crooked figure spoke, his voice a slippery shrill of superiority. "This territory is occupied by Arlong pirates, and no wayward sailors may approach until the marines have removed them. Move along now before you suffer true damage."

Sanji frowned at the man, while Gin drew his double-barrel pistol. Luffy had recovered by then and pouted at the Marines.

"Hey! That's not nice to do! Don't sink my ship, or I'll kick your ass! And if you know where Arlong is, can you take us to him?" the small-minded captain suggested.

"Chichichichi! Silly boy. Do you honestly not know who I am. That you can intimidate me in any conceivable way?" Captain Nazumi

jeered from far behind his men. "Sink that ship and remove them. They are a justifiable obstruction to our duty here, and need to be removed in the most expedient way."

"Gum-gum: Pistol!" Luffy had enough, throwing out a long punch that nailed the cooked marine dead in the face, long before the imbecile could think to dodge. Then he extended both arms forward, grasping the railing of the opposite boat.

"Gum-gum: Rocket!" Several marines went down, as Luffy spread his legs to close-line them as he passed. Naruto grinned at the Monkey's style and brought his hands up.

"Shadow-clone: jutsu!" Producing three dozen copies, the shinobi led them over the water and up the haul to join in the beat-down. Gin himself grinned, before taking aim at the gunners.

Quickly both of them were shot dead, bullets right between their eyes. Just as rapidly, all of the crew was beaten up and Luffy stretched one arm back towards their boat. He shoots himself forward with one arm around Naruto, straight towards Sanji and Gin.

"Gh-! Wait, straw hat you-!" GGWWWWBBAAAKKKK! Sanji's complaint was cut off by Luffy colliding with him, causing the entire boat to shake.

"Whoops! Hahaha! Sorry Sanji, my bad!" the grinning captain apologised to the mowed-down cook. Who quickly rose and began dropping his foot on the younger teen's head.

"Sorry! That's-bwang-no-bwang-way-bwang-to-bwang-treat-bwang-your-bwang-own-bwang-crew,-bwang-idiot!" the scolding came, joining with one kick for every word.

"And you!" Naruto shuddered under Sanji's voice, anger and concern mixed together.

"Naruto, you're still recovering from that poison! Don't run into fights like that without thinking first!"

Naruto simply pouted, "But I feel fine, Sanji-senpai! There was a fight and I wanted to help Captain Luffy and-" his excuses were cut short, and a rough hand on his shoulder.

"Kid. Krieg's HM5 ain't something you can jus' shrug off aftah a day. Sanji's right. If we run intah a fight, let the big guys take it." Gin bluntly declared. Naruto only huffed and crossed both arms, silently promising to show them he was fine.

"Hey, Gin!" Luffy called over after crawling to his feet. "I wanna talk to you about something. And Sanji, come on and get lunch ready! The sooner we eat, the sooner we can get rid of Bastard Krieg then go and get Nami."

Sakura and Zoro walked through the streets of Cocoyashi village. After finding a cave to act as a rendezvous, the group split into pairs; Kakashi left with Sasuke to poke around the forests and landscape silently, while Zoro and Sakura strode through the village to spot any traces of Nami.

Most of the residences avoid them, giving way before Zoro's scowl. The swordsman's hair was a deep shade of black done by Kakashi to hide his green hair. While Sakura was under a henge, appearing like herself with a narrow forehead and the same hair-shade as Sasuke. The girl could barely hold it, though, at the depressing sights around her.

'These people... they... they look almost like those in Tazuna's village,' the sheltered Genin thought, spotting children clinging to their homes and adults with hard eyes. The shops around barely had any goods or foods to sell, and everyone was glancing about with fear.

'This place doesn't look anything like people in Konohagakure. And everyone's acting like someone bad is going to come out of the blue at a snap. What is going on here? And maybe we can help these people like w/e did in Nami no Kuni' the girl thought.

"Hey! Hey there, Mr. Blackhair swordsman and the tiny girl beside him!"

Sakura stopped, along with Zoro. Turning aside, the girl's mouth hit the street.

'Wh-.....wh-' "What the, how do you have six arms! And that guy beside you has a mouth that resembles a swordfish!" she exclaimed.

10 meters away, two figures stood at well over 6 ft. tall. One of the pair had pink skin and a protruding mouth, sporting a red sun tattooed on his forehead; the other was teal-skinned, with a tell-tale swordfish's nose, with a matching symbol on his shoulder.

"Well of course we do, as I'm an octopus fishman, and Crawley here is a sword-fish fishman," one of them spoke up, politely. "Now, why does the man beside you carry a sword in Arlong-Pirate territory! Identify yourselves, both of you, now!"

Yet, before either could speak, six figures pointed back at their addresses.

"Oh, my name! Well, I'm Hatchan, a swordsman and officer of the Arlong Pirates. All my friends call me Hatchi, though," the man politely spoke, four hands in a thumbs-up while two gave peace signs.

Zoro made a soft grunt, placing his hand on Sakura's shoulder.

"Really? Well, I didn't know you didn't allow weapons to be carried here. My sister and I got stranded on a lifeboat in a storm some days back," following a story Sakura and Kakashi had put together.

"This island was the first one we spotted, so we were just wandering to find somewhere to stay. Travelling on the seas without any weapons isn't the best idea to go for. Does your crew control this village, then?"

Hatchan blinked, while his partner eyed them carefully. But Sakura recovered her wits.

"Please!" the smart girl fell to her knees. "Please, my big brother was injured during our escape. I patched him enough to walk, but we really need a doctor to help him. That sword he carries is a family heirloom and the only token we have of them. I... I have some money to pay you if there's a doctor here who can help us."

The fishmen turned their attention to Zoro, noting his grip on the weapon and the heavy amount of bandages.

"Huh. Well, if he's got that many bandages, he probably wouldn't be able to use any weapons at all," Hatchan declared. "And if you don't live here, there isn't much reason to collect from tribute. Crawley, let's leave them. I haven't seen them here before, and nobody here would try to use that sword on us because of what Arlong would do to them," Hatchan declared.

"The doctor's place is just around that corner," he described 3 figures pointing out in said direction. "Head on over, then make sure to leave soon."

The pair began to move away, as Sakura rose to her feet and Zoro stepped up.

"Hey, we're looking for a girl named-Grrr!" Sakuua punched the man in his chest, right over the injuries.

"Big brother, we won't find your old girlfriend here! Asking about her won't do anything but upset these people," the girl scolded him.

"Hmmm, a missing girlfriend, huh?" the fishman Hatchan asked, causing Sakura to panic. 'No! No, no, no, no, no, no-!' her mind drowning in dread, but keeping her face hidden by Zoro's kneeling figure.

"Hmmm. Well, let's see," Hatchi's voice continued. "No, I haven't seen any other ladies come through here at all. Nami is due to be back by now but hasn't shown up here yet. Wonder what's taking her? Oh well, you must be a lucky guy to have a girlfriend Mr... Oh! How rude of me!"

Hatchan faced Zoro lightly. "I'm sorry, I either didn't ask or was rude enough to forget your name.

Once again, with Sakura watching, six digits were pointed back at Hatchi. "Huh! Whatdoyoumean? I already told you my name. Hatchan!" The last words were joined with six hanky's waving in farewell before the friendly fishman turned and left. "Nice to meet cha!"

Once they were out of sight, Sakura turned back to her partner. And immediately was frozen by Zoro's glare.

"Brat....explain... that... hit. Now." His voice growled towards her. Eyes demanding answers, as pure fear rippled down Sakura's spine.

"I....I... I-I'm s-s-s-sorry Zoro-san....uh... I-I h-hit you bec-because I was afraid if you me-men-mentioned Miss. Nami then it mi-might lead to the-them asking h-how you me-met her... O... (gulp)... Oritmighthavetippedhe-her offbeforewe-weknewwhat's... (hhuuuuu)... goingon-andmight causeherto-toleavethisislandagain." [3] Sakura brokenly explained, in fear for her life.

Zoro frowned for some minutes, before merely nodding. Easing himself to his feet, he began to walk on. "Alright. Come on, let's get to this doctor. I won't be of much use if we have to fight if these open up."

Sakura followed him, towards the doctor's office. Ignorant that she had witnessed a miracle.... one over a hundred times rarer than the Logia-class or Mythical-Zoan type Devil Fruits.

Roronoa... Zoro... was going... in... the... correct... direction.[4]

Elsewhere on the island, Kakashi and Sasuke stood high in the tree line, scanning over a large building several stories high, sporting black flags with the motif of a saw-tooth shark across the roof.

"Guess these pirates aren't really too afraid to hide where they are. If Nami is connected to these guys, staying here will let us see her before too long," Sasuke observed. Focus solely on the target of their role on the island.

Kakashi kept a more open eye on their target.

"Perhaps. But there is a lot more to see here than that, Sasuke. For a start, this base is a clear sign of how to find them to anyone. If a Marine ship were passing by then they could simply report it somewhere and a large fleet could be sent in with orders to remove them. That certainly hasn't happened at all, there aren't any traces of a fight along the walls or inside the bay, nor any traces of those canon weapons at all."

"Everyone on this island likely knows these pirates are here as well, yet they haven't removed them. What does that tell you?"

Sasuke glared at his sensei before the more rational part of his mind began to process those facts. Several moments passed as the boy worked to uncover and fit different pieces together, while Kakashi continued to spy on their target.

"They aren't afraid of being caught," Sasuke muttered. "Or they might have some contacts to ensure the Marines either don't know they are here."

"That is a better answer," Kakashi acknowledged. "I've counted at least 40 different pirates down there, thus far. Including Arlong himself in that deck chair. Plus, we aren't certain if-

"There!" Sasuke hissed, passionately. Following his outstretched hand, Kakashi saw the doors of the building had opened, with a familiar orange-haired girl passing through them. From a distance, he spotted her moving a wooden bow-staff into collapsible pieces, and then storing it down her cleavage.

Pushing some perverted thoughts aside, the Jonin also spied a mark on Nami's uncovered shoulders. 'That's the same exact mark as the flags. She must have kept the tattoo hidden beneath her sleeves the entire time with Zoro and the others.

"So, she is one of them... traitor!" Sasuke growled, his shoulders tense as the betrayal of another benevolent figure crept into his mind.

"Sasuke." The tone in Kakashi's voice brought Sasuke to a halt. The tones were deep, focused and cold, the byproduct of a former ANBU. "If she is with the Arlong Pirates, then a confrontation with them might be coming once Luffy, Naruto and the others arrive. I'm going to stay here and tally up their strength and try to move in closer to their base."

"You are to stay here. Should something happen within their base and I lose an inconspicuous way out, a distraction from you will be essential."

Sasuke stayed in place for a time. Two emotions warring inside his consciousness, follow orders he'd been given, or give in to his instructions and confront the traitor.

"Uchiha Sasuke!" Kakashi fixed him with a demanding glare. "Should you follow her, then you would be following your brother's advice. Pursuing hatred and vengeance at the expense of everything else."

Kakashi watched carefully as Sasuke went through dozens of reactions.

Shock was first, before giving way to anger. Reflection followed, all clear to see on the boy's face. The Hatake kept an expecting eye trained on his student until Sasuke let a long, shuttered breath pass. And nodded.

Satisfied, Kakashi vanished, moving closer to the base, unseen and unheard. Electing to use conventional stealth and avoid needless chakra consumption, any and every shadow, blind spot or gap were opportunities for him to move. Too fast to be spotted and completely aware, it took minutes for Kakashi to reach a shadow inside the front doorway near the roof. Deducing that many tall fishmen would typically look ahead or downwards, he listened, felt and smelt for any clues or advantages that could be found.

"Hmmmrr. That damn Marine Nazumi's several hours late," one voice, sharp and jagged came from outside. "The scummy human is often very prompt whenever I send a message to him."

"Chew... you don't think the skinny rat would've gone turncoat and squealed to other Marines, do you Arlong?" A response came, causing Kakashi's eyes to narrow.

'So that's Arlong's voice,' he focused on the conversation, as a third voice came up.

"Hhh. That would have meant incriminating himself along with us. You remember the deal our boss made, he gets a tied bonus for keeping attention away from this island and our business. Maybe Momoo got hungry and swallowed their boat, the garbage humans wouldn't be able to handle that giant sea cow."

"Shahahahahahahahaha! That's a good point, Kuroobi. Still, now would be a bad time for our friend's appetite to get the better of him. Nami's getting a little too close to fulfilling our bargain."

As Arlong mentioned that name, Kakashi's eyebrow flickered slightly.

"You know, I still can't believe that she's served us with such loyalty for these eight years now. She knew the consequences after that red-haired woman was killed by you, Arlong, but even the Celestial Dragons that Aladdin described put family first and foremost."

"Chew... just goes to show how terrible humans are. All they want is power and survival, without any higher goals or fidelity."

"Boss! Boss, boss!" a new cry broke into the conversation, filled with urgency.

"There's a Marine ship within half a kilometre of here! They're from the Branch 77, and are getting ready for a fight!"

Kakashi's eye narrowed, curious to follow the consequences; but his ears picked out several footfalls running for the door. 'Damn! It's a risk but-' keeping himself hidden, the Copy-nin's hands began to weave signs. "Transparency-jutsu." Cloaking his body with chakra, the masked ninja was soon invisible, and measuring his chakra consumption carefully while Arlong's voice came back.

"Branch 77, is that right!"

"Yes, that's the one, Arlong," the messenger replied.

"A newcomer then. Alright, Chew, pay them a visit and negotiate with the man in charge. If 2,000,000 isn't enough for them to overlook us, then kill everyone on board!" At his command, several dozen splashes came from the courtyard, joined by a loud blast that Kakashi recognized as a canon ball.

"Oh no! It's head straight for Arlong and Chew by the door!" making Kakashi nervous. 'I need to move, and most of the crew are outdoors now. From their scents.' Rapidly but maintaining his transparency, the Jonin moved through the halls via the ceiling. Finding one room with an open window and hiding nearby with a view outside.

He watched as the canon ball was incoming straight for Arlong, his eye narrowing as nobody moved to stop or avoid it. The projectile was coming in towards Chew, but he was quickly thrown aside by a hulking figure with a black mane of hair and a bright yellow shirt. "Arlong!" many of the fishmen shouted, and the canon ball neared his head. To be caught in the fishman's mouth, and shattered by his jaws moments later.

"Whoa. He crushed a cannonball." "Those jaws are terrifying."

"Chew... boss, I could have avoided that. You didn't need to intervene," the crewmate who had been thrown aside responded. Arlong spat the pieces of iron and gunpowder from his mouth, before turning to his subordinate.

"Chew. If you had evaded it, that ball may have hit a column and damaged Arlong Park. I know very well that you are strong, just as you know I would never let any of my crew be harmed unnecessarily, brother," the being responded. With more than a glimmer of concern in his eye that Kakashi could easily see.

"So, what about the talks?" a familiar voice came, from a pale fishman wearing a dark blue gi and built as a fighter.

"Cancelled," Arlong answered, followed by rousing shouts from the others. They were eager to get stuck in a fight. "Chew... pity Hatchan went into the town. There's no point wasting time and exercise to take out the trash. Kuroobi, let's take five others and deal with these wannabe idiots. I'm going to double-check those sea charts Nami drew up, then we'll take care of them."

Kakashi kept a close watch as they departed. Barely anything followed for several minutes until the group returned.

"Any issues?" Arlong questioned them.

"Chew... nothing all at. Those sea charts from Nami's work were perfect, as they always are."

"We just removed the rudder from their ship by moving underwater, then repositioned a reef down below into a strong current. A whirlpool we made dragged it to the seafloor without any problems," Kuroobi's voice joined in.

"We know everything about these waters, from the winds to the currents and the depths. Though I admit most of that is due to the records Nami drew up. If she can be persuaded to make more of them for us to cover all the world's oceans, nothing would be beyond our reach to rule or control."

This suggestion was followed by a loud sigh from Arlong. "I know. She's brilliant. She would be critical in the creation of the Arlong Empire. But it's a shame she's been so successful with our deal."

"I know..chew. Still remember the day that tiny brat had watched you kill her mother, and made a deal to buy her village back for a hundred million bellies."

Unbeknownst to them, that caused Hatake Kakashi's blood to freeze....only the man's trained senses let him follow what came next.

"That's correct. We agreed on it eight years ago. And I'm the kind of man who always keeps his promises when it comes to money."

Kakashi had heard enough. Try to restrain his emotions and not reveal himself with Killing Intent, the Jonin slipped away from Arlong Park.

End.

To clarify the encounter with Momoo. I was telling it from the Mugiwara and Ninja's mindsets. And none of them know Momoo has a name. Plus, the sheer size of a Sea King or similar animal would only have comparisons to Summoning-creatures or Biju in Naruto. Humans with amazing power isn't something too unfamiliar to Kakashi, but something on a Sea-King's scale or the kind of power

from an Admiral would likely be the only things that would be revelations to him.

That is why running into Momoo shook Kakashi more than Mihawk's presence did. Also, I hope I was able to capture the essence of how Kakashi himself fights in this chapter. Rather than just throwing in the iconic skills that different characters use in-series, I always want to focus on their tactics, their mentalities, their MO towards a fight; balancing iconic skills with their own mentalities and actions in a fight.

I actually placed this chapter on-hold after some PM's asking about a new chapter for my other story Hanyou Family came in. I hadn't updated it in nearly 4 months, so I placed that one as a priority. Now that it's finished, I will endeavor to keep updates more balanced.

To tell the truth, this chapter didn't take too long to write once I returned to it, and I am glad to have one of my favourite character on the scene now! Hatchan! I love that octopus fishman, and his quicks can be pretty fun to write! Aside from him, I do hope that the hypocrisy and prejudice from the Arlong Pirates was well-established here.

Along with Arlong's character and priorities. A lot of people cast Arlong into the same light as Don Krieg, but both men had one critical difference: Arlong's highest priority was his crewmates, treating each of them with true brotherhood and deeply concerned and angry when they were hurt. Don Krieg viewed his crew as an expendable means, while Arlong valued his crew above everything and would never hurt or abuse them at all.

[1] -Naruto databooks. Prior to taking a Genin Team, Kakashi had completed 1,141 missions total; including 414 B-ranked, and 298 A-ranked. The only characters with more completed official mission to their credit are the individual Sannin.

[2] -Kakashi may not have been credited with this skill in-canon. But his skills with Fuinjutsu were sufficient to create a successful Evil-

Sealing Seal over the Curse-mark Orochimaru gave to Sasuke. I doubted the complexity of the latter fuinjutsu would be higher or more intricate than standard storage-seals. Plus, this also means that if Kakashi can make more scrolls, the Straw hats can store more treasure in them, and avoid it being stolen by people who don't comprehend where the treasure is hidden. Of course, there are some down-sides as well.

[3] -Sakura might be less than useful most of the time canon before Tsuande beat some common sense into her. Here, a) there was no Sasuke to distract her, b) no Naruto to annoy her, c) she was serious after seeing how people were living under Arlong, d) 1 month of some real-life work to put her mind to.

[4] -This is not a total gag! It happened for a reason in the following chapter.

Hostile Encounters

Chapter 12: Hostile Encounters, of words and swords.

Alright. I am officially closing the results for who will fight Arlong in the next chapter. The Results:

1) Luffy vs. Arlong: 17

2) Kakashi vs. Arlong: 10

3) Sasuke+Naruto vs. Arlong: 3

(Note=To me, the only way Sasuke and Naruto could have won against Arlong, would be Naruto pulling out his inner-demon. I had multiple scenario's planned so this fight would have some parallels with both of them against Haku without being a carbon copy. And the repercussions of the rest of the crew seeing that side of Naruto.)

To be honest these votes actually surprised me, but majority rules in this case and I will stick with the popular demand. Luffy vs. Arlong, while Kakashi has his own job to do...

Please Read and Review.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece.

"Where is it? It was right here just yesterday morning! How could that much treasure have disappeared like that!" Nami screeched near the top of her lungs.

"Nami, be careful with how loud you are. Or Arlong and the others might notice and come looking."

The navigator's head rose to a doorway, and the comforting sight of a tattooed woman older than herself, her face carrying patience and assurance.

"I'm not doubting that the loot you found was here when you left. Why don't you go over what happened? Is there a chance they might have hidden the treasure somewhere aboard?"

The girls were in the Going Merry's Meeting Room. Nami's eye made another sweep around the room, but nothing stuck out or came to mind.

"No. Those guys weren't smart enough to hide their stuff like that, Nojiko. And I made sure the ninjas never left this boat carrying anything. The last time I saw the treasure was just before the older one was carrying those scrolls in here," pointing to a stack of five over in one corner.

"He didn't leave carrying anything else, and when I asked he said they were some personal belongings he wanted to bring along.

Frustration clawing through her, Nami walked over to the table. Pulling out a chair before she slid, planting her elbows on the table and resting her head in her palms.

It was morning, following her first restless night since running into Luffy and Zoro. At the first sight of dawn, Nami had moved the Going Merry from the wharf at Arlong Park. But after she went looking for the treasure, the unpleasant revelation ensued.

Raising one hand, she slammed a fist on the table.

"Damn it! This is the third time I've searched! I know it was here before I left! All that treasure! I never thought to check on it after Don Krieg arrived before throwing Ussop overboard. Then I had to stay outside to watch where I was sailing too and was so distracted worrying about those damn ninjas chasing me. Once Arlong Park came in sight, all the fishmen grabbed my attention and I never even thought about an extra look in here!" she cursed into the air.

"Hey, get your chin up. You're still more than close to that 100,000,000 and selling this ship certainly can net us another a few

million anyways," Nojiko coaxed, sitting down opposite to Nami.

"Please, save it Nojiko. If I can find where this loot was moved to, then I'll be one small job away from that goal. We could even pocket those few million you mentioned for selling this boat," Nami growled lightly.

"Well. You'll just have to put up with my optimism," The older sibling reminded her.

"I can't let my little sister drag herself down like that at all. You remember what Bellemere would say, don't you? Keep on smiling even during hard times. After all, you still have me and our home,"

Some minutes passed in silence, before Nami raised her head, glancing around the room. Memories of the few brief days with three boys were found in every corner, even the injured partners they had picked up and a bright, smiling boy with blonde hair.

Eventually, she stood up, with a smile that shocked Nojiko to her core.

"You're right," a murmur came from Nami's tiny smile. "Dwelling on set-backs probably wouldn't be what she would want at all. I just need to keep working harder to fill out this bargain," her arm was moving to the hateful tattoo on her left shoulder.

"It... it's been a while since I visited her. Hasn't it?" a rhetorical question came from Nami, while Nojiko remained stumped in her seat.

"Come on. Let's get going."

Minutes later the sisters left the ship and were moved along the coastline towards a destination they knew all too painfully. Nojiko herself kept a close eye on her surrogate baby sister, working up the courage to ask.

Soon they found the grave. A simple cross on the cliff-side, overlooking the bay. Nami stepped forward, kneeling before her true mother's resting place

"Bellemere... I'm... sorry I haven't come here for a long while. And for losing the money somewhere on the way back," a soft voice came passed the lump in her throat.

"I've been busy. Things with Arlong haven't been as bad as they could be. Now, I'm just 13,000,000 bellies away."

"I was gone for a long time on this last trip. I even ran into a couple of Marines and other pirates from the Grand Line. Some wanted me to join them. I said no, you know I care about Cocoyoshi village and Arlong too much to do that. But..."

The girl took a deep breath and passed through her, fighting to keep tears from spilling out of her eyes.

"But I admit. I'm having some trouble forgetting this one group I found..."

"N... Nami?"

"Hmm? Yeah, what is it Nojiko?" she asked.

"You... back there on the boat. You actually smiled. I know how rare that is for you after Arlong came here. What came across your mind to bring something like that out?"

"hhhhhhhh. Well," a downcast look crossed over the enslaved navigator's face.

"This time... the group I suckered to get that ship. They... they were different from everyone else I found before. I... I just went with them for a quick ride, but soon we ran into more than a few tight squeezes, and they had my back."

Several memories came to her mind, of storms and stupidity, or the different fights she had been forced into by Luffy and Ussop. A group of three children came through her mind behind them, girl-talk, and a pair of boys that reflected two sides of herself, the avenger and the joker.

"The truth is. When I was with them I... I completely forgot about the pain I bear. We went through quite a bit, but then... then more people came, and they... they almost reminded me of myself, and of Bellemere."

"A group of kids and this grey-haired man, their teacher. You probably wouldn't believe what I could tell you about them. But... two boys... they reminded me a lot of myself."

"We're nothing like you, betrayer!" an angry voice invaded their privacy. Nojiko whirled in surprise, finding two children she did not recognize standing in the forest some meters away. One had long pink hair and made concerned glances at her partner; a dark-haired boy with deep fury channelling towards Nami.

"You even mentioned the name of the man who murdered your own mother, then speak about working for him with pride!" the boy accused her, with red eyes dotted with three tomoe orbiting the pupils, two in one, a single in the other.

"Sasuke-kun!" the girl spoke up, "You heard from Kakashi-sensei, didn't you? She does that for a reason, to help her village become free. She deserves a chance to explain herself more than that."

"Excuse me," Nojiko interposed, stepping between them and her younger sister.

"To start off, who are the pair of you, and why have you come here? And second, what do you know about us at all, or our lives and struggles?"

The younger girl stepped forward to reply, but Nami beat her to it.

"Sasuke and Sakura?! How and when did the both of you get here?!"

"Umm... K-Kakashi-sensei was able to track you, Miss. Nami," Sakura responded. "Back at the Baratie I talked with Johnny and Yosaku about where Arlong has been hiding, and we realized you were coming here. We arrived here yesterday but decided to look around the village to see what was going on. Kakashi-sensei went into Arlong-park and-"

"Somebody did what!? If he gets caught then Arlong will be angry and-...."

The sister's exclamations were silenced, by a slicing prick on their cheeks. Nami raised her hand, feeling a warm sensation trickle between her fingertips. Drawing it back, a thin line of blood covered her palm.

"He won't get caught," Sasuke spoke in an icy tone, his arm extended before an upward gesture followed. A pair of slicing edges skimmed past their ears, seconds before Sasuke caught them in his fingers; two shuriken connected to his hand by a thin wire appeared.

"Sasuke-kun, why did you do that?!" Sakura pleaded with him. "Kakashi-sensei told us how Miss. Nami was being extorted into working for him! None of this is her fault?!"

Sasuke didn't take his eyes off Nami and Nojiko.

"Kakashi is a Jonin, an elite ninja. He won't get caught sneaking around unless he wants someone to find him. He was inside yesterday when those marines attacked and overheard Arlong talking about a woman he killed, your mother."

Noticing the reactions from the two women before him, Sasuke folded his arms, keeping disparaging eyes trained on Nami.

"There aren't any Fish-men around, we made sure before coming out into the open. So, are you able to explain why you are working to

help the man who has your mother's blood-stained over his hands, unavenged?"

"Because from what Sakura learned from the villagers here, you joined Arlong willingly and betrayed your home and family just for creature comforts!"

Nokijo frowned at the boy, reminded of another she had met the day before who was stupid enough to attack Arlong Park. She began to walk over to the boy, only for Nami to shove past her and swing a hay-maker at him, first.

The boy shuffled back to avoid the hit, while the girl duct out of the way. Nami's hand slipped into her cleavage, pulling out the sections of her bow-staff and taking swings at Sasuke. Sakura watched the Uchiha effortlessly evading all her strikes, with only millimetres between the solid wood and his skin. Sasuke was showing off.

Nami herself spun around, thrusting out with the butt of her staff. Sasuke sidestepped it and cut at her hand with a kunai in his left. With a scream, Nami dropped her weapon and fell to her knees, but Sasuke was not finished. The boy stepped back his arms outwards in a dramatic stance, as Nami was fixed in place, bound by several ninja-wires wrapped around her entire body.

Nojiko and Sakura gasped at the sight of Nami trapped in Sasuke's grip. As the Uchiha's face remained a mask of iron, he pulled harder, causing Nami to whisper, the thin wire cutting into her skin.

"Stop!" Nojiko rushed forward, calling Sasuke's attention away from his prey.

"Nami is my little sister, and she already has to suffer enough under Arlong's enslavement! Tell me, how did you meet Nami, and what right do you have to disparage her over our dead mother?"

Sasuke glared at the older girl, a cold, piercing look, but not for long. Shuriken quickly severed his wires, and Nami slumped forward free

from his trap. Sakura suddenly appeared between her teammate and the other two, her hands raised to press them apart

"Stop! Miss. Nami was part of the pirate crew we had joined around one week ago. They promised to help us find our way back home after we became separated from it. During an attack by a Pirate called Don Krieg, Miss. Nami stole our ship, the Going Merry."

Nojiko blinked, trying to process how such young children could be accepted onto a pirate boat. As Sakura's green eyes met the distorted brown ones that Nami carried.

"We managed to follow you here, Miss. Nami. Yesterday, Kakashi-sensei overheard Arlong gloating about killing your mother and about the deal you made to buy the freedom of your village for 100,000,000 bellies. But I'm guessing that you couldn't find the treasure on board?"

Nami blinked, before shooting to her feet. She lost her footing, though, and Nojiko caught her before the ground could add further agony.

"Where? You didn't leave it at that restaurant, did you?!"

Sakura shook her head.

"Kakashi-sensei hid the treasure onboard the ship. In a way that only a ninja could find it, in case someone tried poking around and stole it. Or Luffy-san wasted all of the treasure on food. If you tell us what is going on here, then Sasuke and I might be able to uncover it for you."

Nami blinked, while Nojiko eyed everyone carefully, with her own ideas in mind.

"Nami," calling her sister's attention.

"We need to get those cuts and your hand taken care of. As for the two of you."

"Follow us. If you want to know the truth, then out in the open is not the best place to share it. We'll lead you to our home. But, only if you both give your word not to confront the Arlong pirates. We don't need you solving our problems for us, or risk them growing worse."

Sakura dropped her arms, but...

"I don't see anything that needs further explanations," Sasuke spoke up.

"These eyes can see far more than an average human can. Nami has betrayed you and your mother by not taking revenge on the man who killed her. Eight years have passed, that you have spent working as his underling, rather than dedicating yourself to revenge. Pursuing it for the death of your family was something you refused to even consider, even so far as to take his mark on your shoulder and wear it with pride. You-"

"Shut up!" Nojiko hissed. She met Sasuke's eyes, wide and carrying a fury that lit a spark of fear in the self-righteous avenger.

"Revenge. Listen carefully, and ensure that you understand, boy. I don't care who you are. If you despise Nami for your reasons then that is none of my business. Though I can tell you cannot comprehend our lives, because you lack the most crucial element for revenge."

Sasuke was filled with a fresh wave of hate, her accusations at the words from his old brother coming forth to his mind.

"Patience. It takes time. Should you know of our mother, then you know I suffer as well... Revenge is not an easy path for one to carve out. You don't have what it takes to suffer for revenge. I can tell. You believe it has to be pursued and honed, consuming your every thought for all minutes of the day. But should you rush, and take

revenge before you are truly ready, then I can guarantee you will fail, and those you care about will find no rest because you were too foolish.

As her tirade finished, Nojiko turned along the path, supporting Nami with one arm over her shoulders.

"You don't have the patience to suffer for revenge, as we have for all this time. If you want to learn more, then follow us. Or run off and let all of it be for nothing."

Sakura blinked, before turning to Sasuke. His sharingans were no longer active, and the boy even appeared shaken and chastised. Wordlessly, Sakura placed a hand on her crush's shoulder. With a quick glance, they both followed Nojiko into the forest.

Elsewhere on the island, Zoro strode down a path near a series of rice patties. Glancing around, he didn't spy any fishmen there then ducked into the nearby foliage and began roving about. Before taking light stop by a tree.

'Hhhhhhhhh,' Moving one hand over his chest, Zoro had been fighting an itch beneath layers of bandages covering the stitched-up token Hawkeyes had left. 'I definitely owe one to Sakura for finding that doctor yesterday. He was damn annoying, making such a big deal out of nothing before he got to stitching me up. Plus, we learned how he needed money for this month's tribute.'

As the symbol of the said pirate crew came to his mind, Zoro raised a hand to his forehead, 'Damn. This business with Nami is worse than I'd have ever thought it be. Working for the bastard across eight years, and stealing enough to buy freedom for her home on the side? Never thought she'd have the selflessness for that.'

Focusing himself, Zoro pulled back up to his feet. 'There's no point starting anything until Luffy and the others get here. Still, spending time only with these ninjas has been pretty awesome. Nobody told

them that bad joke Nami, Luffy and Ussop use about me getting lost. It better not turn into a running gag with this crew.'

Shrugging off his thoughts, Zoro stood up and began to move towards Nami's house.

"Kakashi made a good call sending me to keep watch for the other once they arrive. Now, if I only find where those damn fishmen moved the coastline too," he grumbled, ignorantly lost once again.

Meanwhile, Sasuke and Sakura were following Nami and Nojiko into a tangerine orchard. Sakura glanced around, smiling at how well-tended the fruit trees were, some flowering with the season and others with fresh fruits ready to pluck off their branches. Trying to distract herself from the storm churning in Sasuke's eyes.

'Sasuke-kun... why would he attack Miss. Nami so suddenly like that? He's not as angry as he had been after we were dropped here by that Genie, but I'm still a little scared to even say anything to him. He wasn't like this at all back at the Academy, no matter what came up or who said anything to him. Why has this business with Miss. Nami leaving us gotten him so riled up?'

"Sit somewhere at the table inside," Nojiko's voice broke into her thoughts. Looking ahead, Sakura noticed they had come to a small house. Walking inside she glanced around, finding a single bed in the corner, a small kitchenette, and small personal touches around the house.

Sasuke did the same until he spied a photo on one table by the wall. In it were two children younger than he was now, one with orange hair clinging to the arm of a slender woman, sporting a daring hairstyle with shaved sides, short bangs and a ponytail. She had a cigarette in her mouth, and a smile that he could easily place.

"Is that her, your mother?" Sakura spoke up, while Sasuke remained silent. "She has the same kind of smile as Miss. Nami. Though... wait!" She scrutinized the sisters, Nami facing the kitchen with her

back to the younger girl, then pointed at the photo. "Her eyes and hair, and yours! None of you share them, and those are hereditary traits! Did she adopt you both?"

Neither of them moved for a moment. Until Nojiko set Nami down on a chair and moved into the kitchen.

"Yes, she did. Nami and I both lost our genetic parents to a fight between a pirate crew and the Marines when we were small children. I was a toddler, and Nami was an infant. Bellemere was with the Marines during that fight and wounded quite badly. Still, she managed to rescue us both and get us back to this village through a storm."

Carrying a first-aid kit, Nojiko sat down beside Nami and began to bandage up the shallow gashes left by the sharp-wire.

"Afterwards, she decided she wanted to be a mother for the pair of us, and we lived with her right her for years. Life wasn't too easy though, and we didn't have a lot of money for three people to live together. But, she still made the most out of what she had, and then some. Those were the happiest times in our lives. Until it was all stolen from us by a monster."

Sakura blinked, her respect and sympathy for the sisters rising further. Memories of Tazuna, the bridge builder telling them about Kaiza and Inari stoked those feelings even further.

"Tell us more" Sasuke's voice came to them. He was seated at their table across from the pair. Nojiko glared at him, even causing the boy to flinch under her gaze.

"Are you going to attack us again if you aren't satisfied with the story behind our lives? What assurance can you give me that if something comes up that you disapprove of, you won't hurt Nami any further?"

Before he could respond, a heavy pouch fell on the table. Sakura was standing there, her ninja pouch unbuckled and removed.

"These pouches contain any weapons that we carry, including shuriken and kunai. If Sasuke removed his and placed it where you could see, and we both kept our hands on the table, will that be enough?"

Everyone blinked at the youngest girl present before Nojiko nodded her head. Sasuke did the same, confident that if danger were to come, he could still evade it and weave hand signs for ninjutsu. As they moved, Nami began to fidget.

"Hey, hold still, Nami. Yeah it stings, but ch'you just gotta suck it up," her sister complained.

"It's nothing, you know that Nojiko. Quit-Ow!" Nami had started in a tough tone until Nojiko flicked her forehead none too lightly.

"Save that tough act for another time. You know you can't hide anything from me."

Sasuke... couldn't....move. The gesture he'd watched. Unconsciously, his hand rose to his own forehead. *"Sorry Sasuke... a gentle poke came just above his eyebrows..."some other time....."*

After she finished with Nami, Nojiko asked if they wanted any tea. With some requests, she moved into the kitchen and began a long explanation.

"Nojiko!" Nami called over, in a callous, detached voice. "This is none of their business. If they know about my deal with Arlong, then we just need to know who to get that treasure. Then they can leave without any problems at all."

"Nami," Nojiko began, again. "If they know the full story, then it will make them back off much easier, probably even leave instead of staying around and causing more harm than good. Like they said before, more crew members are on their way."

"Now, you children. Listen closely. Bellemere, our mother. She was the entire world to Nami and me. None of us were related by blood, but the emotions we carried for each other and the home she gave us made us true family. More than that, when Bellemere found us, she was on the verge of death from her wounds. Seeing us, especially Nami, gave her reasons to cling to life, and she got us back to her home village through a storm that should have killed her."

"Nami and I were the reasons Bellemere found to continue living. We became the centres of her world, and her the centre of ours. Our lives together were not smooth sailing. Some things like money were pretty tight, she would even starve herself sometimes to make sure Nami and I wouldn't want for anything."

The blue-haired woman laughed, half-heartedly. "Nami would even steal a few things in the village and always had a cheeky reply for anyone who complained," with a tiny, impish grin at her sister.

"Hey!" the navigator pouted in reply. "You are the one who beat up a boy one time, not me!"

"That was after he bad-mouthed one of our Tangerines. And you know that Nami!" her older sibling shot back. Before the pair of them let out a soft chuckle. The moment of happiness quickly passed, and a sombre mood returned.

Nojiko went further, detailing more about their lives together. She described a woman with an attitude nobody could match, a heart of gold towards her daughters, giving anything she could to them, no matter what it cost Bellemere herself.

"She always had a reason, or an excuse. She was on a new diet, or certain foods were better for her skin. But children and only be fooled for so long."

"Bellemere cared more about being a mother to us than anything else in her life. And... that was why... why she died."

"Eight years ago. Arlong and his crew arrived on our island. Nami and I were in the village when they stormed in, demanding 100,000 bellies for every adult and 50,000 for every child, non-negotiable. The villagers knew Bellemere couldn't have saved up enough to pay 200,000 for the three of us, and he didn't notice our house at first. But... she had been cooking a special meal for us, and the smoke from the chimney gave her away."

Sakura was trying to stay composed. To hear so much about an incredible woman, with the awareness that she had been murdered, was almost more than her sheltered heart could take. Sasuke had become more aloof, until the story moved towards Bellemere's death and the tension from him began to grow.

"Bellemere tried to fight back, she even held Arlong at gunpoint with a rifle in his mouth. But he snapped the barrel in half with his jaws. The village lawman, Genzo tried to deceive the pirates, thinking Nami and I could escape from the island if we hid long enough. But Bellemere knew better. She had been a marine, so it was simple for her to know Arlong had destroyed any ships to prevent us from leaving the island and telling the Marines what happened."

"She proclaimed that Nami and I were her daughters, and that she refused to deny us, even if it cost her... (gulp)... her life," Nojiko's composure began to slip, while Nami's head was downcast, the memories of her pain sharp and deep.

"Arlong... he murdered her. Right... in front... of us. But that was not the worst of it."

"Huh?!" "What?!" both of the Genin spoke up.

"After he killed her, one of Arlong's men found a map of the island, that Nami had drawn. Even at ten years old, Nami had amazing talent as a cartographer, and that monster recognized it. So, he abducted Nami, taking her with his crew... as virtually a slave."

Sakura gulped, while Sasuke's face was blank. Focused solely on how to comprehend being forcibly taken by the man who destroyed his life...

.....that was one fate he had been spared of.

"Arlong took me," Nami took over from her sister.

"The first thing I saw after that was how Arlong sunk five marine ships easier than you can throw through shuriken knives. He... he forced me... to join his crew... by giving me this mark on my shoulder," her hand clenching the tattoo of the Arlong pirates.

"But I still want to be free, and for my home to be safe. So, I made that deal with Arlong. I would buy Cocoyoshi village from him for 100,000,000 bellies and spend the rest of my time drawing maps and sea charts for him."

"Nobody inside the village knows, either," she explained, shocking Sakura and Sasuke even further.

"After... he gave me... this mark. I went back to them and acted like I only cared about money. It's my problem to solve, so nobody will intervene and make things worse."

Nami raised her head, meeting the pair of Genin with eyes both desperate and dead.

"That is why I need the money onboard that ship. It's taken a while. But with the money onboard the Going Merry, I'll be 7,000,000 short of that goal. And if you or the others come here, talking about how you know me or try to start a fight with Arlong..."

"If we... do that, then he'll... take it out on... the village and likely... kill everyone you have been working... working hard to protect all... this... time," Sasuke finished for her, his tone soft, light, a wisp in the breeze. "All of the work you've thrown in will be for nothing."

The shift in the boy's attitude left the three females stumped. Gradually, he filled his lungs, then let a cleansing breath through his mouth. With a fresh question in his mind.

"Tell me. Have you ever thought about trying to kill Arlong at all? If you're on his crew, then slipping him poison or a surprise attack would-"

"-I did," she whispered.[1] Nearly loud as a cricket, Nami's words stopped Sasuke easily. A pair of wide, shocked eyes burst forth in response.

"I tried a few sneak attacks, poisoning him, even a straight-up assassination.

Her hands curled into taunt fists, her arm trembling with hatred. "I did try, and all of those methods. Failed."

Sasuke looked forward, his eyes nearly as dead as Nami's. Slowly, she dropped her head, while Sasuke tried to process what she had described. 'Failure. Failing... to take revenge...'

Several minutes passed, and nobody said a word. It was some time before they noticed Nami had fallen lightly asleep.

"Hmmm. Talking about everything must have taken a lot out of Nami," Nojiko observed.

"Hang on!" Sakura requested. "I'll get her a blanket," rising from her chair and drawing a scroll from her pouch. In a second, she unfurled it, formed three hand-signs, and a thick blanket appeared in the middle. One she gently draped over Nami, while Nojiko looked over in awe.

After making sure Nami was comfortable, Sakura gulped down past a stubborn lump in her throat. Awe and horror filled her mind.

'Miss. Nami... you became little more than a slave to Arlong after what he did. Not even Inari had it that bad with Gato, or Zabuza. You must hate him, but you still pushed beyond that hatred and suffering to do what you know is right. The villagers clearly don't know, or they don't care enough to notice how badly you have been suffering for... eight... years. I can't imagine what kind of life that can be like. There's nobody in the Leaf Village who suffers that much discrimination, ostracism or carries a burden that terrible.'

"H... how...?" her eyes darted from the paper to the very real blanket Sakura had drawn.

"Where did that blanket come from?"

As the two Genin had been learning about Nami's life, Zoro was still working to find his way around the island.

"Damn it, who dropped me on top of this damn tree!" Zoro muttered, one hand on his hip, the other around the trunk of a palm tree. And trying to figure out how he'd gotten there.

"What's the big idea of this place? Do the fishermen shift everything around like those up-turned houses back there? Still, be a pretty good way to keep people on this island by making sure they'd get lost."

Once he reached the ground, Zoro spied a cloud up in the sky.

'Hmmm. It looks, kinda like one of Sasuke's shuriken. Well, guess I'll use it as a way-point to get around here,' he decided. Turning back the direction he'd come from.

'Hm! Someone's been through here recently,' he thought, bending down to examine the tracks.

'Must've just missed them. Well, no reason for them to leave, so the coast is probably somewhere around where they came from.'

He strolled off, taking a few turns, forming a pentagon of directions, everywhere but the coastline.

"OOOOPH!" Zoro grunted, stumbling back from the solid mass he'd turned directly into.

"Hey, watch it-whaaaa! A Sword!"

Reflexively, one hand grasped Wado Ichimonji. Zoro's eyes open, to a spear flying for his head! He threw himself back, shifting his balance to keep both feet planted, evading the blade by centimetres. As the spear drew back, Zoro recovered, shifting Wado and taking a stance. Ten fishmen were gathered before him, each of them armed for a fight.

"That human is defying Arlong's authority here, no weapons are permitted to be in their possession!"

"We came out here to train and looks like free practice came along."

"Take the sword!"

Two in the front rushed Zoro, and the swordsman fought back on instinct. Four minutes later, the clearing was littered with wounded enemies, as Zoro clicked Wado back into his sheath.

'Damn. With only one sword, that took way too long. Better make myself scarce, in case someone comes along.'

Running from the same battle site, he dashed through various trees until one he arrived at a pathway, with rice paddies across from the forest.

"What! Damn, I'm back here again!" he cursed, but before he could run away-

"Hey! Hey there, you swordsman! Identifying yourself immediately!"
The man cursed himself, turning around... to find a familiar sight three meters away.

"Hmm? Oh! Hey, I know you. You're the black-haired swordsman from yesterday,"[2] a tall, Octopus Fishman called over, with two arms pointed upwards, and four on his waist.

"Ummmm. O, yeah, I remember you. Hatchan-san, was it?" Zoro asked, playing along since the black dye was still in his hair.

"You remembered, nyu. I'm quite glad that you did! Looks to me like that doctor in the village did help you out yesterday. Hey, where is your sister, ~nyu? Did she get lost, or something?"

The fishman asked, his arms flowing in wavy motions with the wind.

"Ummm. Yeah. She did," Zoro plainly lied. "This morning she wandered off to look around, but I haven't seen her since sunrise. She usually goes to look out at the sea whenever we're away from home. Kinda gets homesick."

"Hmmm. I see. I can understand that a little bit. I haven't been at my own home for nearly 12 years now, nyu," Hatchi confessed.

"Yeah. Hey, could you tell me how to find my way to the coastline? If I walk along it, finding her shouldn't be much of a problem." Zoro suggested.

"Oh! Well, I can't let humans wander around these islands to do as they want. But missing family can still be important. Nyuu!"

The fishman grabbed a large pot nearby on the ground, lifting it to his shoulder before walking forward, passing Zoro and grasping his hand on the way.

"Come with me. I'll head to the coastline and give you a ride in this barrel through the water. And if she isn't there, the only other place would be in the forest. Can't leave a little girl like her out on her own! ~nyu."

As the fishman dragged Zoro towards the water, Kakashi snuck into Arlong Park. Hidden carefully, the Jonin had been watching Arlong's crew with exceptional care, along with spying on the various rooms inside Arlong Park.

'They certainly have been there for a long time. There was quite the collection of weapons, supplies, medical resources and money stored in here. This Arlong is certainly a miser, but there was far too much in there to just be solely from a single village. He's running quite the protection racket around here. Hm?'

The Jonin continued to explore the fortress, taking care not to be noticed by anyone. By then it was approaching mid-day when something unexpected happened.

"Hey, boss! Boss! That Marine Nezumi and his scummy crew finally got here!" a voice came from the courtyard.

"Oh, finally. What kept that man a full day late? Hatchi, you and Chew go out to meet him. Shioyaki, Mashuru, Rokoro, Itakami, Riesten! I want the five of you to hide below the waves and keep your eyes open for any funny business."

"Chew... boss, is that really necessary? We can overpower them without a sweat. You know that-chew," a familiar voice came in response.

"I don't want to take any chances, brother. He is a full day off schedule. I would not put it passed the rat to consider turning us in somewhere and bringing more trouble down on himself Should that happen, it will be bothersome to find and negotiate with another Marine captain."

As the fishmen departed, Kakashi slipped down to the outdoors. A quick substitution, and he was outside the walls, just far enough to still listen in on the meeting between this new arrival and Arlong.

Several minutes later, the sounds of their approach travelled over the water, and new footsteps were heard inside.

"What kept you so long, Nezumi?" Arlong opened the discussion.

"Chi. A troublesome and insolent crew decided to attack us out of the blue. They were a group of only five total, and moving too close to this island, so I decided to remove them. One had devil-fruit powers though and got a lucky shot in. Still, he is quite gone by now, so nothing should concern you at all."

Silence ensured for an uncomfortable length before Kakashi heard a few beings approach the table, placing stacks of paper nearby.

"Here is this month's take. I hope you enjoy it," Arlong's voice rose.

"Chi chi chi chi chi chi! I must save, those scum we ran into could certainly take lessons in their intellect from you, Arlong. You know how the world works, and how many doors can open with the right persuasion."

"Shahahahaha! Indeed! And you as well. Few Marines know that befriending me would mean they can milk the East Blue for all eternity. You and I are alike of mind in that regard."

'So, it's a pay-off to this Marine captain,' Kakashi realized. 'He simply takes easy money and leaves these people to suffer. Including my comrade, Nami-san. Well, it seems I will be paying this Marine a visit as he leaves.'

Hatake Kakashi promised to himself, before listening to Arlong's rising voice.

"As a rule, I hate all humans. But you are the one tolerable exception that I found. But on to more pressing matters. I have a favour that solely you can resolve. One that will bring a far larger payout than usual."

"Hm? More money," the shrilly voice, laced with greed, of the Marine came.

"Yes," Arlong spoke up. "You see, one of the people here in the village has been saving up quite a lot of money for a while. Their plans were to buy freedom for their people, per an agreement made between her and myself. Still, doing that would cost me a valuable crewmate, so that really isn't an option for me. Should I raise the price, things may become ugly, and their trust in my goodwill may decline. Plus, as one of my few flaws, I am the kind of fish-man who would never break a deal related to money."

Kakashi's single eye widened at Arlong's predicament. While Nezumi clearly caught on fast.

"Chi chi chi chi chi chi chi! So, you want me to seize this treasure hoard and confiscate it? Well, how can I say no to that? After all, it is stolen property and thereby has no business being kept by such petty thieves. Otherwise, order would collapse, and things would get out of hand."

"Hmm," Arlong's smirk was easy to hear.

"Glad to see you are so amicable. Kuroobi?"

"Yeah. Right here, Along," another officer spoke up, followed by a ruffle anyway less than a Shinobi would have missed.

"The treasure should be held somewhere near a tangerine orchard I have marked on that map. Keep the lot of it as you want. With it away... shahahahahahaha! Then that feisty little kitten will stay with my crew forever, drawing maps and sea charts for the rise of the Arlong Empire!"

Kakashi had heard enough. Running through the new priorities in his mind, he left Arlong Park with a careful body-flicker.

"I need to warn Nami, Sakura and Sasuke of what is going on."

Elsewhere, Zoro and Hatchan were cruising along the coastline, one of them standing inside the barrel, while the octopus fish-man was paddling through the water, making small talk.

"So, what do ya think? Piracy is a full-time job and I definitely am loyal to my captain. But once I find that missing sauce for my takoyaki recipe, I'll open a restaurant somewhere and cook day until night! ~nyu." the fish-man proudly described.

"Hmm. It sounds like a decent plan. Not sure about going for fried octopus, though. You said yourself that you're an octopus fish-man, didn't you?" Zoro responded.

"Oh? There's no problem there from where I'm concerned, ~nyu. Humans and fishmen are of different species, but we actually have the same blood types. A few I heard of even become couples and can have kids together. If it comes to genetics, I'm closer to humans like you than any fish. It's no different than one of your kind cooking up those creatures called monkeys, another primate, to eat,"[3] Hatchan explained. Before crossed two arms under his chin, taking up a pondering air.

"At least, I think that's what it's like. I don't really know a lot about these kinds of things, ~nyu."

Zoro shrugged, "Well, I'm not someone to throw around accusations or call someone's thoughts right or wrong. If that's what you want to do, then I wish you good luck."

"Why thank you! You're a real stand-up guy, you know that? Now, it seems we still haven't run into your sister yet, even after crossing the coastline twice, nyu," Hatchan commented.

Zoro frowned, trying to come up with a fresh excuse.

'Staying here might bring more questions. And I'm two swords short for a fight. Sakura-san and Kakashi-san also mentioned not bringing problems down until the others get here.'

'This guy is a little of an air-head. Maybe I can trick him in the forest, then slip back to the coast and leave him to get lost.'

"You're right. She might have gone back to the village by now. Think we can move to the beach then walk back?" he suggested.

"No problem! Let's go there. You're pretty good company anyways, nyu," Hatchan agreed. Minutes later he was moving towards the beach. Once they were close enough, Zoro leapt for the sand while his guide stood up from the water.

"Follow me, I'll show you the way through."

"Okay," Zoro agreed. Letting Hatchi walk ahead while he stayed behind 'If he's out front, then I might have an easier time slipping away-'"Oomph!"

"Huh? Something wrong up there?" Zoro had walked into Hatchan's back after one minute of walking through the tree line. The octopus was not moving and dropped his ferry-pot.

"RRR..RRrr-rrr-rrr-WH-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what happened here to you?!" The octopus-man exclaimed. Zoro watched as he ran on ahead, into a clearing filled with wounded fishmen. The same ones Zoro had fought with a little over an hour before. Some were groaning in pain or had regained consciousness.

'Oh, boy,' the swordsman began to sweat. 'Better go now,' he turned to his right, while Hatchan was running ahead, looking over his crewmates.

"Men!? Wh-what..no! Who did this to you? How could this have happened to each of you? It's terrible!" he was kneeled by two of them, trying to ease their suffering.

"H... He..Hatchi. I... I'm sorry....this guy... he!" one began to moan.

"Stop talking, Gamakento. I'll help you all back to Arlong Park, then we'll find out who did this!" The Octopus fishman began piling his brothers over his shoulders. Hatchan was exceptionally strong even on Fishman standards. Carrying ten other fishman only took effort and was far from impossible. Two of them were able to stand with help and began walking together back to their base.

But, after only a handful of steps, Zoro dashed out from the bushing in front of him.

"Huh?! Mr. Swordsman?! I thought you were behind me."

Hatchan was surprised. And grew suspicious as Zoro's face showed a hint of panic at the sight of him carrying the other fishmen.

"You! What brought you back here, human filthy! You're the one who attacked us!" a Fishman on Hatchi's right.

"What!? Fusazane, are you sure it can be him? I was helping this guy look for his lost sister earlier," Hatchan looked around in confusion.

"Yeah, that's him. He cut all of us down, Hatchi. We were just walking around, and this damn human ran out from the bushed=s and attacked us!"

"Hey, I was just walking around when you started that fight, dumb-ass!" Zoro growled back. For a moment, his mouth hung agape, before whacking his own forehead.

'Damn. That was just stupid.'

His confession caused the Six-armed officer to freeze, while Zoro's eyes began darting around, looking for spare weapons.

"NYUUUUU! YOU BASTARD! YOU TRICKED ME AFTER HURTING MY BROTHERS LIKE THAT EVEN AFTER THE HELP YOU GOT

YESTERDAY!?" The Octopus-Fishman was shaking a fist at Zoro, steam with pouring from his ears.

"Fusazane! Run and find help for our brothers and get Arlong while you're at it! Ryuya! Take our brothers from my arms! If he beat all of you, then I'm the best one to take down this disgusting man, with my own six-sword-style!"

Quickly, the fishman complied with Hatchi's orders. Once his burden was gone, the Octopus reached for his back.

"Huh!?" his arms grasped for the pot he carried earlier.

"Uh-oh! I dropped my load!? It had my swords in it!" three pairs of hands grasped Hatchan's face. Quickly the octopus began spinning around, darting hither and thither, trying to find his giant gourd while shaking his head all the while.

"Uh? Of all the times?"- *swish* -"I was that distracted"- *swish* -"Need my swords to fight him!"- *switch* -"OH, oh, oh, oh, where did I leave them?!"

"Hey! You... looking for this thing?"

Zoro's voice called over. The swordsman, now wearing a green bandana, was now holding two spare swords in his hands, standing behind Hatchan, and pointing at the clay barrel to his side.

"Huh?" Hatchan questioned, his head cocked in confusion. "Where did you find that!? And why did you tell me where it was?!"

On his part, Zoro shrugged. "Well, I needed two spare swords, so while you stood there distracted, I snuck past and picked up these from the ground," gesturing across the pathway, littered with weapons from the earlier fight. "You said you were a swordsman, and scars on the back on a swordsman's shame." Zoro nudged the gourd towards Hatchan with his boot, then placed Wado Ichimonji in

his jaws and held two borrowed swords in each hand. "If we're having a sword duel, take out your and try me."

Several fishmen blinked, once... twice... three times. Before Hatchan remembered why he was angry and drew six cutlasses from his pot.

"Grrrrr. Don't patronize me you human! First, you hurt my brothers, then you beguiled me into helping you, and now you have the gall to insult my skill by thinking yourself equal to my six-sword-style! Let's go!"

Hatchan's rage left his eyes plain white, while Zoro smirked. Drawing Wado Ichimonjo from its sheath and placing the hilt in his jaw.

"You asked for my name before. I am Roronoa Zoro. Let's see how my Santoryu can do against your Rukotoryu."[4]

He raised the pilfered Fishman swords, adapting the face of a wolf, hungry, cunning, lithe and focused.

Hatchan was a raging bull. Forceful, determined, and all too eager to lock horns.

"Takoashi Kiken!" Hatchan charged forward, his swords appearing to flail around him. Zoro knew better, his eyes noting how the Fishman remained upright and balanced with every step and traced the narrow spaces between each strike. A wild hurricane of slashes, chops and stabs moving in a rhythmic flow, incredibly wild yet intrinsic and efficient.

Zoro pivoted back, his blades deflected each strike, rather than becoming locked in place to block them. The force behind each strike was incredible, each blow made Zoro's joints rattle. Hatchan's strikes were honed by great dexterity, though his precision had room for improvement.

Zoro ducted beneath four for the blades, parried two low thrusts, and twisted his body, sending the blade of Wado Ichimonji to slip through the Octopus' guard. A cut tore through Hatchan's shirt, missing his body, while Zoro flowed with his rotation. Spinning some meters away from his opponent.

Hatchan ended his six-sword barrage, pivoting around before raising his swords. Each one pointed straight ahead, their tips meeting together, resembling a drill as he charged Zoro again.

"Nyu~Tentacle Sword: Overload!"

Meters from his target, each of the swords were drawn back, set at different angles. Zoro could barely follow them, left with only a second to choose evasion or defence.

The swordsman took a third one, counter. Crouching to push off the ground, the green-haired combatant struck outwards, angling each of his own blades to parry two of Hatchan's. The attack was thrown off, but Zoro's momentum carried further, manoeuvring himself around to Hatchan's right, and cutting through his body with the blade in his left hand.

Zoro twisted himself around, to recover his footing before looking back at his opponent, panting deeply.

'Damn... feels like... that attack... ripped by st-... stitches open. And this guy... he is no joke.'

Zoro pushed his mind away from the pain searing in his chest and rose to his full height.

'There's no mistaking it. He's definitely a swordsman, not some idiot flailing around.'

"Nyu~~! Don't think that one cut means this is OVER." Hatchan had taken the same stance as before, barreling towards Zoro with all swords pointed forward.

"Rukutoryu: Octopus Pot Stance!"

Zoro dove aside, while Hatchan continued forward, drilling through multiple trees, until he hit a solid rock wall head-on.

Zoro blinked at the display, then sweat-dropped.

"Or.... I might have been wrong and this guy is just a big, pink, fool."

"Damn you!" Hatchan's voice called back towards him. "You are certainly a slippery enemy! I'll need to use all of my blades to cut off your angles to slide through, then cut you apart!"

Before he charged in again.

Zoro dashed forward to meet him. Both swordsmen decided to measure their foes before more committed attacks. Sparks were flying as they bore down on one another. The hulking fishman pressed into his dwarfed enemy, while Zoro was spinning about, following instinct and skill. The human was constantly moving to shift out of one strike or build momentum to parry another. Zoro worked to give his attacks, but the fishman's skill closed any openings before a blade could pierce them.

Soon, both combatants looked their blades together, four of Hatchan's pressing against those in Zoro's arms, while Wado Ichimonji was blocked by the remaining two inches from Hatchan's neck.

"Strength!"

"Huh! What was that!?" Hatchan demanded. "Speak up further, but no words from you can distract me!"

Zoro glared up at the Six-limbed swordsman.

"Strength. That's what this style capitalizes on. But I've sparred with a crewmate whose attacks were faster. Plus... your reasons. They are different from mine," the santoryu master declared.

"Hm. Don't think for a moment that you've measured my skills, swordsman! I'm fast enough, especially since each sword I carry weighs 300 kilograms![5] And I am fighting to avenge my crewmates you hurt beforehand! How can you say that reason is weak, foolish human?"

Hatchan pressed further into their blade-lock as he spoke. Zoro's muscles could barely hold against this stronger opponent.[6]

"That's... not what I meant," the Straw Hat swordsman groaned.

"My swords will always carry more weight than any you carry. Not in their mass, but in the burden I carry."

Zoro's posture softened, recalling words from his rival, and others that had spoken the day before.

'Kuina. ' One day, one of us will become the best swordsman across the world.' Sasuke, 'Zoro, you have to defeat him and fulfil your goal! ' Luffy, 'The King of the Pirates wouldn't have anything less than the best on his crew!' and my own vow to him, 'Until the day comes that I can take his title! I... will never... never be defeated again! Is that ok, King of the Pirates!?''

' I failed back at the Baratie against Mihawk. And right here, this fishman is at least a part of the suffering that Nami has put up with for eight years now.'

"I... am Roronoa Zoro. Vice-Captain of the Straw Hat Pirates. Under Monkey D. Luffy, the man who will become the King of the Pirates," he declared, proudly.

"The burden of his trust, in the promise I swore years ago, and for the sake of my crew. That is what I carry in these swords."

Zoro lowered his body, prepared for a new attack, while Hatchan blinked at his speech.

"Huh? Zoro? I thought he was a green-haired swordsman who carried three swords. Your hair is dark as the night sky. Are you really him, or just spewing hot air?"

Zoro blinked. "No. I dyed it before coming to the village so it would be harder to recognize me."

Hatchan's eyes narrowed, before widening with shock.

"Hey! If you are him, then you're a bounty hunter, not a pirate! You must be trying to take Arlong's bounty! There's no way I can let you near my captain! Take this!

Instead of his swords, the Octopus fishman raised his head skywards.

'Good target!' Zoro thought, leaping forward to slice at his throat. But Hatchan attacked first.

"Hachi-ink jet!"

From his mouth, the octopus-fishman spewed a geyser of dark black ink. Zoro threw his head low, driving to the ground and avoiding the stream of ink, though his hair was given a fresh coat of black colour. Hatchan spun around, covering the entire forest with ink, before dousing himself.

Once he was dripping black, the Fishman began to tip-toe, carefully.

"Hahahahaha! One benefit a fishman has over a human is I can use this to escape or to hide anywhere I wish. Now you can never-
GHUKKKKTH!"

"Santoryu: Oni Giri!" Zoro whispered. Dashing past Hatchan, leaving three fresh cuts in the fishman's torso. Hatchan clenched his teeth, fighting past the pain as stripes of red covered his ink-black body.

"Just because you covered yourself with ink, doesn't mean nobody can spot you. That monologue also gave you away to me

immediately, idiot," the swordsman declared. As Hatchan spun around, fury now clear in his eyes.

"Damn you! I underestimated such a cunning enemy. No holding back now!" the fishman exclaimed, spinning his blades above his head.

"Rokutoryu Ogi: Six-Sword Waltz, Twister!" A fan appeared over Hatchan's head, cutting down any trees surrounding himself, and drawing small pebbles into the air stream. Zoro grimaced as he ducked and weaved around flying trunks, thrown around by the vortex from the Octopus' blades.

"Roronoa! This vortex will box you in, while I stay safe here in the eye of my twister attack. The only safe place around here is right where I'm standing and coming here will bring you right where my six swords can dice you apart!" Hatchan roared.

"Don't count on it!" Zoro threw back in reply. Dropping low to avoid another flying tree, then spinning in place. "Santoryu: Tatsumaki!"

Zoro strained to overpower his foe with his own twister, but Hatchan ramped up the rotation of his own blades. It overpowered the smaller tornado quickly, and Zoro was nearly pinned down by the pressure of this attack.

'Damn... I can't over-power this guy. And my wounds are slowly me down, slightly,' Zoro noted, as a slippery sensation trickled down his chest. 'Maybe fighting harder will....wait-'

The swordsman's mind turned back to his sparring matches with Kakashi.

'The Jonin was pivoting around the deck of the Merry. Evading every strike from Zoro as the younger man pressed harder into him. No matter how high Zoro increased his rhythm, the Jonin remained one step beyond him. It was deeply aggravating until a kunai deflected

one sword, and Kakashi was inside his guard, resting his knife across Zoro's throat.'

"'You're a skilled swordsman, Zoro-san, no questioning that," the grey-haired man complimented. Met with a growl of humiliation from Zoro, at the ease he was beaten with. "But, predictable," Kakashi continued. "Overpowering someone by surpassing them with one attribute, whether, strength, speed, or reflex to press home your own techniques might not always meet success. If you want, try looking for different avenues to attack from, as opposed to only the most direct way.'"

Looking his opponent over, Zoro weighed Kakashi's advice in his mind.

'Okay. Head-on won't work unless I avoid getting swept up. Going low might work, or...'

Hatchan grinned as his tornado sent another tree slamming towards Zoro. This time, the swordsman didn't evade it, struck head-on by its truck.

"There! You see! Now watch as my Awesome Six-Sword Style slices you into tiny sushimi!"

Yet, the human he was fighting disappeared from his sight. Hatchi started glancing around, unsure of what was happening.

"Hohhh!... Where'd that bastard go?!"

He combed the entire surroundings, while reflexes honed from thousands of hours kept his spinning blades moving, and the tornado surrounding him alive. He drew a single figure with his sword anchored into a tree closer to his target.

'Now!'

"Sentoryu: Falling Streaming Wolf Swords!" As Zoro pulled his blade free and pushed off downwards, Hatchan only had time to notice the shadow below him. Falling through the eye of the hurricane, Zoro shifted around the blades, slicing through arms and hands as he twisted around, to find a graceful landing for his savage attack.

"AAAHHHHH! OW, ow, my hands!" A clamour followed as Hatchan dropped his swords, his arms and hands littered with clean gashes.

"My mistake," Zoro admitted. Rising to his feet. "I was aiming for your head."

Hatchan was about to shout until he noticed the red stains through Zoro's bandages. The man's humiliation and fury were growing to an all-time high, stoked further by the disarmament Zoro had given to him.

While on the opposite side, Zoro's posture faltered. An angry blaze was searing through him, from the wound on his chest. 'It feels like... that cut from Hawkeyes... the last of my stitches... were lost in that attack.'

'No matter. I am not... allowed.....to fail," he stoically promised. Before his ears pricked at the sound of charging feet.

Raising his borrowed blade and the one in his mouth, Zoro met and countered those of his enemy. Only four swords struck out, while two were held back. Another exchange followed as Zoro threw his counters at Hatchi, using each sword equally. Sparks flew as the blades met one another, mixed with Zoro twisted away from thrusts the Hatchan used as pot-shots.

Blood flew over the clearing with each clash, Either from Hatchan's wounded arms or the few strikes that pierced through Zoro's guard and left shallow cuts across his chest and face. The Human pressed further, determined not to lose or back down from his enemy. While Hatchan was waiting for the right opening.

"Octopus Open-guard!" Two blades crossed over Wado Ichimonji, while the other two forced Zoro's hands upwards. "Head-butt!" A solid head-butt battered into Zoro's chest, sending him flying backwards, and tearing all of Mihawk's tokens clean open.

Zoro fell tumbling through the brush until he landed by the shoreline. Struggling to drive air into his lungs, he pushed up from the ground, forcing himself to rise to his knees. One foot came up before his body screamed in protest.

"You aren't getting away from me, Roronoa!" a voice came some meters away.

"Get up," Zoro cursed himself. "None of these... can keep me down. How can... I challenge Mihawk again... or call myself the Vice-Captain... to Luffy....if I fall here!"

Forcing himself higher, Zoro stood tall and ready as his opponents closed in.

"Rukotoryu: Pot Stance!"

"So, that move again, huh?" Zoro remarked as the points of Six Blades moved in towards him. Brace himself low, this time Zoro could read Hatchi's moves and rhythm, with another piece of Kakashi's advice in his ears.

"I know that, Kakashi-san. And I know about studying someone throughout a fight as well. My techniques are my bedrock. Building my physical might on top of them has never failed me before."

"Yet, the lazy ninja merely cocked his head. "Perhaps. But physical might can be circumvented. Try looking for more openings to exploit, or creating one by learning more and more as the fight goes on"

Zoro had found the patterns in Hatchi's Rukotoryu, planning to use another head-butt comb and force Zoro into the water, where he could dominate the fight.

As he drew close, Zoro eyed the swords that were carried by Hatchi's most wounded arms. The moment before they struck, the Human twisted his body; moving Wado and his right blade across towards them. The weakened arms dropped their blades at the clash, while the other four were deflected.

Hatchan tried to stop, as Zoro's left sword came around, opening another wound across his enemy, from hip to shoulder. A mirror of the same cut Mihawk gave Zoro.

Hatchan gasped in agony, clutching his chest with two arms, while the other four held their swords up to guard himself. Zoro himself began to waver, his spirit fighting the temptation put forth by his body... to fall.

'My body... must endure... this pain... to face Hawkeye as an equal... I must be extraordinary!'

Both swordsmen were in a near-equal state. A clear winner was still not decided in their duel.

After some moments, Hatchan rose to his feet again, barreling towards the water, and diving in head-first. Zoro kept watching him curiously, still panting from his wounds and feeling a slight fever tug at his mind.

SPLOOOOOM! "Water Driven: Takoyaki Punch!" Hatchan shot forth out of the water, driving six arms forward for Zoro. Yet, the swordsman dropped into a backwards role, his eyes widening in shock, missing the assault by centimetres.

Another splash told him that Hatchan had returned to the water. Yet Zoro's face now carried a confident grin.

Dropping the blades, he sheathed Wado, before assuming a classic drawing stance. His form was completely at ease, mind blank and ready for the coming strike. The tension sent his adrenaline to full throttle, as odds with the patience demanded for this tactic to work.

"Nyu~ You'll never cut me down, Roronoa!" Hatchan refused, shouting out to his enemy. Only for Zoro to cock an eyebrow.

Twenty-five seconds passed before Hatchan shot out again. "Water Driven: Takoyaki Pun-GKHAAA!"

"Ittoryu Iai: draw!" In a single move, it was over. Zoro's blade cut clean through his mark as the figure's body shot past him. Hatchan tumbled over the grass before a tree stopped him, his consciousness lost to oblivion.

Zoro cleaned his blade, before clicking it back to its sheath. They eyed the dark stains in the waters below. 'All the movement through the water. It caused the freak's wounds to open wider than before. That second try did him in and left a perfect target for me to strike down.'

The man took a calming breath, fighting to stay on his feet as the adrenaline of his fight began to drain away.

"Well, might as well stick around here and wait for the others to arrive."

End.

There was a lot to cover in this chapter. And I needed to constantly find some reorientation to focus on how different events or perspectives of the characters would shape-up. From Sasuke's opinions towards betrayal, to Sakura's ignorance of Jinchuriki and widespread suffering, and Hatchi's character.

I especially wanted to give Hatchi some credit, as many author's do going into much detail for his fight against Zoro, and he is truly one of the more complex characters in the series. Comic-relief aside, learning more about his life in the Sabahoady Archipelago and Fishman Island arcs really gave him a lot of depth.

Additionally, one topic that I got stuck on was Zoro's fighting-style; I needed to keep him within the confines of the East-Blue Arc, where his repertoire, strength, skill, mentality while fighting, and more were all drastically less than he currently is elsewhere in the series.

I hope all the readers enjoyed this chapter, and have some strong opinions over different scenes. Especially relating to Sakura and Sasuke with Nami, Zoro's early fight with Hatchi, and the impending losses to Nami.

Bonus= I sneaked a reference to Firefly into this chapter, one of the most amazing and endearing sci-fi. Shows ever made And challenge readers to find it!

[1]- One Piece, episode 41. Arlong proclaimed that Nami did try to kill him just before Luffy jumped back into the fight. I'm actually surprised this detail doesn't come up in other fanfics.

[2]- Zoro is still wearing the black hair-dye. Sakura took time to wash her's out.

[3]- Critical. A lot of people in different online chat-rooms call Hatchan a cannibal for being an octopus in the series and cooking takoyaki, or octopus-fritters. Personally, I've had the latter and they can be delicious, but coming back to One Piece. Humans and Fishmen do share the same blood-types, and as Charlotte Praline can reflect, they are genetically compatible with each other. This would make fish-men taxonomically closer to humans, rather than fish or octopuses. That's like calling Humans' cannibals for eating pigs, which physiologically have close parallels with human flesh and bone.

[4]- Rukutoryu= literally "six sword style."

[5]- Imperial equivalent=661.4 lbs

[6]- This is Zoro during the East-Blue Arc. He is a long, long, long way from the kind of strength he gained across the Alabasta Saga,

Water Seven Saga and beyond. And fighting with a remarkable strong Fishman.

He Hurt my Friends

Chapter 13:

He hurt my nakama....

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Special Thanks to my BETA Reader: Leaf Ranger.

Please, Read and Review. EPICNESS INCOMING!

Zoro looked around, taking in the shade and isolation of the dark cell he was confined to. The teen clenched his fists, straining against the bonds that circled his body and kept his arms pressed to his back.

'Damn it. They've tied me too tightly for a quick escape. At least they were kind enough to re-bandage my wounds after that fight with the octopus guy.'

Wishing he could have retained his swords, the Vice-Captain shut his eyes. He assumed a meditative pose, while the others on the island had their own tribulations.

Nami felt a blank space obscuring her eyes. Opening them, the familiar haze of sunlight invaded her sight, while the sensation of rest and soreness coursed through her entire body.

"Hm? I... I must've fallen asleep."

Rubbing her eyes before glancing around, she found Sasuke was still in his seat at the table. Sakura and Nojiko were sipping tea before they noticed she had begun to stir.

"Well, it seems that nap was well-needed. You've been out for three hours, Nami."

"Ex-Excuse me, Miss. Nami?" Sakura spoke up.

"I can show... show you where the treasure is onboard. But... but after you collect it. Wh-what if we stayed on this island, hidden from the Fishman? Then, Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke-kun, Naruto-san and I can come with you when you leave the island next. We can ensure you get the rest of the money for Arlong without any trouble and..."

"No!" Nami cut her off.

"I've been handling this on my own all this time, and I don't need help from you or anyone to finish it." The older teen rose to her feet. Her tone wouldn't broker any argument.

"I will finish this on my own. It'll just take a little more. So let's just get the rest of that treasure, and then the both of you can take the Going Merry and leave. You'll run into Luffy on the way and tell him to stay far away from this island. In the meantime, I'll only need to draw a few more maps for Arlong and-"

CCKGR!

Everyone jumped! Sasuke had cracked the table in his grip, the boy's eyes shut, still trying to digest the idea of having to work under a murderer. Or becoming practically branded someone as their property after killing their family, or watching them day after day

Sakura gulped, before turning back to Nami.

"Well, okay then. If that's what you want, Sasuke-kun and I will go look for Zoro-san. He went off on his own to find the coast-"

"-WHAT!? Zoro-san is here too?! Not him and-WAIT!?" Nami exclaimed, grasping Sakura's collar and yanking the girl off her feet.

"You left Zoro-san alone, just wandering around the village?!"

The girl blinked, very, very scared of Nami. While her assailant felt the prick of a sharp blade touch her neck.

"Release Sakura, now," Sasuke demanded, shaking on the table with a kunai in hand.

"Kakashi-sensei suggested that Zoro-san[1] would watch the coastline for when Luffy, Naruto and Ussop caught up. The four of us dispersed this morning from the cave we spent the night in."

At that news, Nami's eyes grew wide. She didn't notice Nojiko scrambling to grab Sakura's pouch for a weapon herself.

The next moment, Nami's face landed in her palm.

"Oh. You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?" Sasuke asked her.

"I'll put it bluntly," the girl dryly growled, "Zoro is more than hopeless at finding his way around. That idiot would even get lost in a straight hallway or an open field. With him wandering around, he'll likely run right into an Arlong pirate and start a ruckus. We need to find him, and fast."

Nami got to her feet. "Which one of you is better at sneaking around?" she questioned the Genin. Sakura deferred to Sasuke as better at stealth. Nami eyed them both, before coming to a decision.

"Alright. Sasuke, you're coming with me to try and find Zoro. Stay hidden, we'll check Arlong Park first to see if the idiot has been

caught or not. Wherever we find him, you need to lead him away and don't let Zoro out of your sight. Nojiko and Sakura. The both of you need to head to the coast and watch for Luffy and the others. If they get close, then Sakura can run out to meet them and tell them to *Get Lost* !" Nami's tone grew sharp as iron over the last two words.

Nojiko tried to argue against Nami going around with the boy that had threatened her, twice. Though Nami was firm, grabbing Sasuke by his collar before running from the house. Leaving the other two with no choice but to follow her plan.

Over the course of 20 minutes, Nojiko and Sakura were running for the coast. One was moving down the path while the other was above her in the trees, her chakra control allowing Sakura to catch her footing even on the vertical trunks.

Soon, they reached the coast, just as a smaller boat could be seen out in the bay.

"Are those them, the people you were waiting for?" Nojiko questioned the younger girl

"Ummm... I'm not sure I can tell," Sakura answered, one hand shading her eyes to try and spot someone on board. "If I could get a little closer then-"

"HHHHEEEEEYYYY SSSAAAKKKKUUUURRRRAAAAAAA!" Luffy's voice rang out across the water. Followed by a pair of arms shooting forward, and Luffy shot off like a rocket straight towards her.

"NIICCEEE TO SEEE YYYYAAAA!"

"WHAT CAPTAIN-!"

**BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAMMMMMM
MMMMMMMMMMM_GUHH-KUTHUNK!**

"NO! S-S-S-SAKURA-CHAN!" Naruto's voice followed the impact.

Nojiko blink, stupefied. A pair of arms had reached impossible lengths, one hand grasping a nearby tree and a matching one on a rock, with Sakura dead in the cross-hairs. Red blur shot out from the boat following those arms, before colliding with the girl in a painful impact.

Next, a boy with blonde hair was running over the water, and another voice had joined the fray, loud enough to cause the boat to shake.

"Luffy, you ignorant, Barbarian! If you hurt Sakura-chan, I'm going kick you down to the bottom of the sea and leave you there!"

How nobody else had heard all the shouts and come running, Nojiko would never know. The figure who collided with Sakura quickly stood up, and just as fast his face was knocked back to the dirt.

"Hm? Ahh! sorry, Sakura-chan! Guess I got too excited." he cried, dusting off the straw hat on his brow. Immediately, a pink blur sailed over another rock, looming above Luffy and hit him upside the head.

"BAKA! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING HURLING THROUGH THE AIR AND INTO ME LIKE THAT! WHAT KIND OF SENSELESS, STUPID, SELF-CENTRED IDIOT WOULD DO THAT!" Sakura exclaimed, as fist after fist pummeled over Luffy's head.

Naruto gulped and began to back away from Sakura's onslaught, before stumbling to his knees. After taking three deep breaths to fill his lungs, he moved down to the beach to help the crew catch up.

"Oh, Sakura-chan? How did you get over here so fast?" Luffy asked her, ignoring the harmless haymakers smacking over his rubber forehead to look at what he collided with. "Weren't you... hmmm? What's that log doing there?"

Sure enough, a wooden log stood at the end of an upset tract in the dirt. With the imprint of Luffy's face clear in the bark.

"It's called a substitution! I used it to get out of the way just before you hit me a second ago! One of the best defensive moves in a ninja's arsenal." Sakura elaborated, as Luffy gained an excited look on her face.

"Oh, it's a Mystery-skill! Like you can turn into a log when you want to!"

Sakura growled, her short patience less than thin at Luffy's near-collision. But before she could respond, a solid black foot struck Luffy's head hammering him back to the ground!

"Ow-that kinda hurt a bit!" the captain complained, with a well-dressed man fuming beside him.

"You stupid, moronic, ignorant, horrible, rubbery, unclothed, idiotic, bastard!" Sanji berated him.

"Hey, I didn't hurt her, Sanji. Everything's fine.," Luffy complained while Ussop, Johnny and Yosaku joined them on the coastline, with another surprise.

Sakura herself blinked at two newcomers, perplexed at their presence.

"Gin-san? Sanji-san? Why have the pair of you come here, and what happened to that man Don Krieg?"

"Excuse me, little lady?" the gaunt man spoke, stepping forward to address her.

"Don Luffy, Naruto, Ussop, Johnny, Yosaku and Sanji beat my former captain. During the fight, Naruto saved mah life from a poison gas. Afterwards, yer Captain offered me a place in his crew, and Ah accepted it."

"Yeah!" Luffy called over to them. "Gin's a nice guy, he even gave the final blow to bastard-Krieg! We gave him to some Navy guys

yesterday before coming here. Hey, where's Sasuke, Kakashii? Didn't you find Nami yet?"

Sakura blinked, trying to digest the news through the wringer that Luffy's collision had given her. But, someone else was present to take the reins.

"So, you are the rest of the crew that Nami was travelling with? If that's the case, then you need to leave," Nojiko firmly demanded, her arms crossed and tone soft yet strong.

"And who might yah be to say that, ma'am?" Gin questioned her. And before getting an answer a black tornado, spotted with hearts, came waltzing in front of the lady.

"Why, you must undoubtedly be the most stunning beauty of this wretched island!" Sanji sang, with a rose in his hand presented to Nojiko. "So much so that even Nami-swan herself pales measured to your lovely and divine presence," a certain chef declared, kneeling before her with one hand over his heart and the other offering her a rose.

"Where'd get the rose from?" Ussop questioned, while Nojiko was engulfed by smoke and Sakura appeared in her place. "Dial down on the romance, Sanji. This is not the place or time for it at all," she ordered him. "First, now that I think about it, I'd guess Captain Luffy finally got you to say yes about joining us?"

The group nodded, while Luffy chuckled at his success and Nojiko blinked from her new position beside Naruto.

"Well, in that case," the pinkette continued, "this woman is Nojiko. She's Nami's older sister, and we need to find the Merry and get ready to leave. Things with Nami are a lot more complicated than Kakashi-sensei even imagined."

The new arrivals frowned in confusion, while Luffy rose to his feet.

"What's there to talk about? It doesn't matter what's going on, Nami's our friend and she's coming with us our navigator."

Nojiko frowned lightly in his response. "Nami isn't going anywhere. Once you hear why, all of you need to find your own crewmates and leave before some additional trouble is brought by your interference. Can I have you promise that if I tell you what is going on?"

"Nope!" Luffy declared, before walking off. "Someone's past doesn't matter. That only says who someone was, or what they did. I'm going to find Nami, then we can set sail to the Grand Line."

The Rubber-man walked forward before his arm was yanked backwards.

"Yeah, come on Captain Luffy!" Naruto pleaded, his eyes wide and curious. "Why not hear about what is going on. Then we can fix what's happening and get Nami to come with us again!"

"Don? Naruto's got a good idea. It might be a good idea to know what's goin' on hereabouts, then take a look around," Gin added, politely to the captain. Sanji had already lit a fresh cigarette, as Johnny and Yosaku stepped forward.

Luffy's eyes turned to Nojiko, fixing her carefully enough to make the woman impatient.

This went on for some minutes until Luffy questioned her.

"So Nami is your sister?"

"Yes. Does that hold some kind of significance?" she answered, smoothly.

"Will you tell us anything Nami doesn't want sharing? Older siblings can be tricky over that kinda stuff."

Blinking at the answer, Nojiko shook her head. "No. Nami actually asked me to share this with all of you. Then hopefully, all of you will

understand what's going on around here."

Luffy barely blinked at her answer. Before he shrugged and moved to sit on the ground. His arms crossed over his chest. "Nami's my crew, so I'm not leaving her behind at all. I came all this way to get her back, and that's that, no matter what you say. So long as that's clear and you won't make your sister mad, go ahead and tell us."

Kakashi Hatake stood before the plain white house, surrounded by a very well-loved tangerine orchard. Glancing around he followed his nose to the path heavy with the scents that guided him there.

'No doubting it, Nami-san's scent is very heavy throughout this orchard. This place has been her home for decades. Traces of Sakura and Sasuke are here too, along with somebody else but then they move back into the forest, splitting into pairs of two. Sasuke and Nami went back to the village, while Sakura and a fourth person are moving into the forest. I probably just missed them by minutes.'

Taking a moment, Kakashi deliberated his options, before choosing the more immediate priority. Kneel down, the Shinobi sent a pulse of chakra through the ground.

"Earth-style: Hidden like a Mole."

Following its namesake, the Jonin slipped beneath the surface of the earth and began shifting about as a mole. Spreading with his chakra, the earth near the hole smoothly shifted to obscure his entrance as the man began to cruise under the earth to search for his target.

"Oh?" he found a solid wooden chest, beneath the orchard. "Here it is. Now, to get to work."

Elsewhere on the island, a party of Marines were moving towards a small house near the outskirts of the town. One had a snide appearance, with sinister whiskers and the face of a rat. Beside him

walked a figure tattered with scars in a brown officer's uniform, his sight fixed on the road and nothing else.

"So, Genzo-san. You are certain this house is the home of the pirate thief, Nami?" the Marine questioned him.

"Yes. She lived there for the first ten years of her life. Still, I'm surprised that you would show any interest in her. She only steals from pirate crews, and nobody else. The brat got into too much trouble swiping books, sweets, or other small things while she was a kid," Genzo questioned them.

"Well, some weeks past, it was found that she recently escalated to theft of Marine property. An inside source informed us that the map to the Grand Line was stolen from the 153rd Marine Branch outpost. [2] Such actions can hardly be left unpunished, hence the reason I am here."

"So that's why you want to question her? I see," Genzo nodded.

'I haven't seen Nami present for weeks now. And I can't believe she'd be reckless enough to get caught and bring the Marines here and interrupt the deal with Arlong. Still, since she isn't at her home, there's no risk for her arrest or questioning by them.'

Soon, the group reached an orchard, with nobody in sight.

"Chichichichichichichi.

Meanwhile, Zoro glanced around his cell again, trying to hear what the commotion outside was about. And recalling how he had been captured in the first place.

' Zoro scanned the coastline again, his face cooled by a refreshing breeze from the ocean. Seated in a meditative pose, he kept two pilfered swords within reach, with Wado resting against his shoulder. He took a deep yawn, trying to force off the appealing urge to sleep.

" What's taking Luffy and the others so long to get here already?" he asked unto himself.

" Hatchi! What the hell... happened to you!"

At the shout, Zoro sprang to his feet groaning at the nuisance of another fight so soon after his last.

To find himself... stuck

Before his eyes, some four dozen people had surrounded the cliff. Each of them armed to the teeth, and a handful were carrying those Zoro had encountered earlier. At the sound of a splash below, Zoro pivoted to keep those on land in his periphery and glanced down to another dozen or so in the water behind him.

Looking between the rocks beneath and the hard place on land, he could only curse himself. 'They suck up while my attention was on the water! And all of these guys are Grand Line-class pirates. Damn... Well... looks like I'm royally fucked.'

" Brother! Don't speak, and hang on, Hatchi! I refuse to lose you today," one of them voiced, kneeling beside the wounded Octopus-Fishman. The figure had a brown ushanka, covered by a black mane of hair down his back, parted by a single dorsal fin. He wore a yellow shirt, with jagged black bolts covering his shoulders, and remained low, cradling his wounded kinsman.

" Damn it, if only Aladdin had come with us! No matter, get here quickly and help our brother!"

" Ny... uuuu... Arlong," a minuscule whisper came from the wounded six-armed pirate.

" Hatchi, please, don't aggravate your wounds further. Tell me, who... hrrr....hrrrr...."

The voice grew thick, building with outrage and concern alike. Forcing some to step back in fear from the shark-finned fishman.

" Who would dare hurt you like this brother! Tell me!" a demand carried to a roar echoed from the cliffside.

Zoro glared heavily, trying to find some escape from his predicament. Yet, all the same, he took notice of how this new enemy held his crewmate with tender care even through his rage. With a closer look, he saw the fishman's head was turned, bringing his ear close to Hatchi and showing a distinct saw-tooth nose.

" What! Roronoa Zoro! The Pirate Hunter!" he called over, and Zoro had to force himself not to gulp.

" Hey, the one who uses three swords! That guy there is holding three of them now! And he's the one who hurt the tens of us before Hatchi came around, Arlong!" another fishman spoke up. Taking a glance, Zoro recognized him.

' Damnit. It's the same one that Hatchi-guy sent back to get help from the rest of his crew. Should've cut him down when I had the chance,' Zoro silently reflected. As the ire of the gathered enemy crew grew higher with the revelation.

" You must be after the boss's head!" "Maybe he attacked to draw out Arlong."

" And he nearly killed Hatchi and left him to bleed out. Humans truly are disgusting and possess no sense of honour or reverence for anything but themselves!"

More suggestions and accusations followed, but Zoro tuned them out, focusing on the more immediate threat.

The figure once kneeling beside Hatchi had risen to his full height. Towering above the others, Zoro recognized Arlong from his wanted

poster and braced himself as the hulking Saw-shark Fishman met him with the smouldering gaze of a righteous berserker.

" YOU! You... Hurt my crewmate, My Bother in all but blood." Arlong began to stride towards Zoro, his voice punctuating every word he spoke. The Swordsman raised his swords, unwilling to fall without some kind of effort.

" Yeah, and if you wanna-"

" You even have the gall to use our own weapons on us?! Only a human would commit such an atrocious act! I WILL NEVER FORGIVE THOSE WHO HARM MY BROTHERS!" Arlong bellowed, before charging for Zoro, as one hand flew to his mouth. The swordsman slashed with two of his blades, angled for Arlong's throat.

" GGGRRRRR!" the movement brought a fresh stab of pain through his wounds, tearing another stitch as Zoro's body started to give, causing his movements to falter.

One sword was stopped by Arlong's nose, another caught by a set of teeth in his hand. A searing group of stabs tore through Zoro's right shoulder, a matching pair of jaws sinking deep through his skin. Small fountains of blood sprayed from the wound, as only Zoro's strength of will kept him from dropping his sword.

With a shrug of his neck, the blade against Arlong's nose was shrugged aside, creating an opening to Zoro's chest.

The Vice-captain failed to stop a shout of pain from slipping through his lips, with barely his subconscious keeping his jaw from dropping Wado. Still, Arlong removed both it and the other swords from him immediately.

Lifting him above his head with a single arm, the Fishman grinned as his crewmates cheered at the agony he had given to Zoro. Moving to

the cliff, the defeated pirate found himself dangling over the edge, only held up by the Fishman's strength.

Yet, rather than drop him, Arlong frowned at a sight he had not registered the moment before. "Hm? What's with all these bandages? Did you take a fall beforehand?" he questioned, tearing them from Zoro's chest.

Arlong had to shift his head, to keep the spray of blood away from his eyes. For a moment, both himself and his crew were silenced, or gasping at the sight of Mihawk's parting token.

' Wh... what's this scar? I can't-believe-he's still-breathing. These wounds are recent, but not enough to be given to him by Hatchi. Did... did he fight him while torn up like this?' Arlong thought, his eyes wide in dismay.

A steady dribble of blood travelled to the water below, as Arlong felt his grasp on Zoro's throat begin to slip.

' How can-he still be alive-with a body like this? The centre scar is enormous, and what of all the others surrounding it? Is he dying already? Am I holding a wounded man?' Arlong reflected, before coming to a decision.

Zoro found himself thrown to the ground, tumbling over as a fresh canvas of blood formed over the ground. Just as he tried to struggle to his feet, Arlong began to issue new commands to his crew.

" Bandage this one up, then take him to a cell in Arlong Park. I want to know how he got here, and if any others know he was coming around." As the fishermen voiced their acceptance, Arlong strode back towards Hatchan. Gathering the now-bandaged crewmate in his arms to carry him back to Arlong Park. "It's alright, Hatchan. I have you now. Everything will be made alright, brother."

Inside his cell, Zoro tried to break through his bonds stifling a groan at the fresh bandages around his chest. 'Well, I hope the others are

doing better than I am right now.'

"Ah, at last, we have arrived," Nezumi eagerly declared, nearly close to rubbing his hands, gleeful to find the promised treasure Arlong had described. His subordinates began to scatter around the yard, while Genzo moved towards the door.

GHKKr-GHKK-GHKK "Nojiko? Are you inside? Some Marines are here asking about Nami."

Inside, the sound of shuffling feet moved to the door. But a stranger answered it, giving Genzo quite a shock.

"Yo. Can I help you?" the strange lazily asked, with towering silver hair and his face covered with a mask.

"Hey, who are you and what are you doing in Nojiko's House!" Genzo exclaimed.

"Chichichichichi. Perhaps this woman or the thief Nami was entertaining some male company," Nazumi implied. Coaxing the vein in Genzo's forehead to bulge.

"What, never! Those two would never do such a thing. But I can't the same about this stranger!" he shouted, with fatherly indignation. "Is true you?! Are you some pervert who tried to sneak in on Nojiko!? 'Cause if that's the case I oughta-"

"Uh, no," Kakashi assured him, one hand raised to deflect the blame as he moved out of the house. "I was merely passing through and found the house unoccupied. A pirate crew and some bizarre events caused me to become separated from my own people some time back. I washed up here in a lifeboat in the night and was looking for someone to learn the lay of the land from before I stuck my head out anywhere. Though, with the Marines here, perhaps things are looking up for me."

"Well, I'm afraid I lack the capacity to help you, mister," Nazumi cut in.

"Some Marine sources have revealed a large sum of treasure taken by the pirate thief Nami is hidden here. The government confiscates all stolen property, and reserves the right to conduct a thorough search to locate and retrieve such ill-gotten wealth."

Genzo's eyes began to view the Marines insecurely, while Kakashi's eyes grew focused and subdued. Reining in the fury in his chest, with cold, practised detachment. "Hmm? Is that so. I haven't seen anything inside or in the tangerine orchard. If something like that were here, there'd like to be some tell-tale signs in the earth."

Genzo had begun to sweat, while Nazumi ordered his men to begin ransacking the property.

"Now wait a moment, you mentioned you only wanted to question Nami, not search the place!" Genzo complained as the crooked officer smirked, complacent with his own cards and position.

"Well, things change, as do priorities. Your cooperation is still required and appreciated for our efforts."

The local lawman glanced around, watching everything fall apart from his mistakes, again. While Kakashi leaned back against the wall of the house, even as the Marines began to move for the house and pull shovels into their hands.

"Yo, that would hardly be worth the effort," he called out to everybody present.

"Listen. As I said, there's nothing inside save for a few cups of tea, and basic necessities for a house occupied by a single person."

"Listen, I used to be an investigator some time ago. So, I appreciate the law and the need to uncover and secure such crucial evidence. Plus, I was a gardener once upon a time. If I can be of service,

perhaps you can find this treasure far quicker. If you can share some background on the thief herself."

Nazumi grinned, striding past the fuming Genzo to stand before Kakashi.

"Well, perhaps I may be able to aid you after all. This Nami girl has apparently been stealing treasure and money from pirate crews across the past 8 years. So came on the Marine's notice upon becoming too bold for her own well-being, stealing from a nearby Marine base. What can you provide for us?" he snidely agreed.

"Well, there weren't any traces in the floorboards inside to suggest a hidden room. Plus the roof beams and ceiling don't have any traces of metal to support a safe or additional storeroom. Leaving the only place to hide such a trove to be the orchard," Kakashi deduced, glancing around at the trees. As Genzo remained quiet and formal.

"Still, digging up all of them would be a lot of unnecessary effort. Thieves steal money so they can spend it, or if she did commit a recent crime then the places where she stored the treasure would have been opened recently. If some freshly dug earth can be identified beneath the trees, that will point us straight to the chest and all the loot."

As Kakashi's detective work ended, Nazumi grinned at such a fortune piece of luck to find the treasure with minimal effort. "I agree. Men, comb the entire ground beneath such garbage fruit trees and locate that 100,000,000 bellies immediately."

Kakashi's eye narrowed at the man, barely able to keep his disgust hidden. 'Not even the plainest effort for subtlety. Between this man and that Lieutenant at the Baratie, I'm starting to see another reason why Zeff didn't mention the Marines as an option for us to travel home with. The only ones around here seem to be dangerously self-centred and corrupt.'

Kakashi barely moved as the Marines scoped the entire orchard but found no trace of the treasure. "Sir, there's nothing here. No sign of any treasure or hidden places at all."

That led Nazumi to shift his attention; the arrogant smirk dissipating to a frown.

"How can that be?! Perhaps it is elsewhere! Search the entire area, just up to the tree line!"

Several minutes passed as the men followed his orders, evening bending around some tangerine trees. But still, nothing turned up. The Marine colonel began to fume. The onset of a tantrum was clear on his face.

"How can that be! That treasure should be here! It's unacceptable and unfair for such a huge sum to be absent or un-promised! It simply must be found! Otherwise-"

"Excuse men," Kakashi tapped the man on his shoulder, schooling his face clear of his own opinions.

"Perhaps this inside source has been less than honest with you? This Nami's name may have been given as a distraction for you so the real brigand could slip away with the stolen treasure unnoticed?"

Nazumi's eyes began to widen, as Kakashi's hidden face curled into a smirk. 'Thieves always believe everyone steals. Or can be too easily misdirected with the prospect of a double-cross.'

Within moments, all of the Marines were recalled and followed their officer to scamper, away, wordlessly.

Some moments after the departure. Kakashi walked back inside, as the Genzo beside him dispelled into smoke.

After closing the door, he faced the real Genzo, who was bound and gagged on the bed with a third Kakashi watching him. The real one

approached them, before sitting down on the mattress.

"Listen. Before I take the gag off, some explanations are likely due. I am a friend of Nami's and part of a pirate crew that was suckered by her. However, after tracking her here, I learned about Arlong, her mother, and their deal to buy the freedom of Cocoyoshi Village."

As he spoke, Genzo stopped moving. His eyes were wide in shock, as his arms and leg relaxed from the efforts to break free.

"From how you reacted to those Marines looking for the treasure, I'm willing to guess you know everything as well. This morning, I was inside of Arlong Park when that same Marine came to visit him for a monthly bribe."

"Uhhhh. Before you have a heart attack, I am a ninja. Infiltration is one of my more well-used talents, and I was not caught by anyone," he assured the older man. Who had grown whiter than a sheet and began to hyperventilate.

"Arlong told that Colonel Nazumi about the deal he made with Nami. And encouraged him to find and seize the treasure as a backdoor to their deal. Likely to keep you under his thumb or Nami as part of his crew."

As Kakashi's explanations finished, Genzo grew stiff, his face thunderstruck. Slowly, the Jonin untied him. While the second one moved to the kitchen to the warm tea kettle. The water was hot enough to appreciate a fresh cup, and soon both men were seated at the table, while the clone disappeared.

"Whu-! H-how did you do that? And-and how did I wind up tied here at all?" Genzo asked, shakenly.

Kakashi swallowed his tea, after fixing his mask using the distraction to take a sip.

"There are many skills that ninja can have. Including clones of ourselves. As the Marines had begun their search and you were arguing with that poor excuse of a rat, I made the clones inside the house. Then just as you were about to assault the marine, one of them transformed into an image of you and switched out unseen. Oh, and....ha-ha-ha" the man chuckled with guilt as one hand rubbed the back of his head.

"Sorry about the rough treatment for the other one after you were inside. This could have become a tight spot if you had attacked him. So, my clone needed to gag and secure you quickly, not gently."

The Jonin chuckled, as Genzo glared at him with indignation. Still, the man couldn't argue that point, and lowered his head to the table.

"Where have you moved the treasure?" he asked in a deep, low voice.

"Hmmm?" Kakashi answered, the voice behind Genzo's words unsettling him.

"Somewhere close at hand. Hopefully, the Marine will complain to Arlong and the pair of them will end up distrusting each other. It may last long enough for the rest of us to arrive, and either pay off Arlong with some money we currently have and a few odd jobs. Or....bring this to a fight and drive them off this island."

"No," the man replied. Rising to his feet. "You don't understand Arlong like I do. He'll rip the entire town apart just to find that loot and keep Nami under lock and key. I understand now, what truly needs to be done. To set everyone free, and make sure that girl doesn't have to suffer anymore."

The man left the table, moving to the door. "Thank you, Mr...."

"Kakashi. I'm Hatake Kakashi," the Jonin supplied.

Genzo nodded. "Kakashi. Thanks for your help. From where we are, there might be just enough money in the village to meet Arlong's deal. If he can leave peacefully, that would be fantastic."

A silent moment hung between them. As Kakashi's eye narrowed at the community leader.

"But. Promise me. If you can, you will protect Nami if Arlong tries to take her again. I'm not strong enough to accomplish that. Tried it once and did more than fail miserably."

"Nami has suffered unimaginably under Arlong's yoke for nearly half her life. Please, stay here and no matter what, get Nami off of this island, and ensure she does not return at all. That girl deserves to be free."

He closed the door, leaving Kakashi alone. After a while, the Jonin finished his tea and left the house. 'Might as well head for the coastline and see if-'

BAMHHH-HHH-HHH!

Birds in the trees scattered, at the gunshot from the forest.

After they left her home, Nami and Sasuke went straight towards Arlong Park. The pair had been running for several minutes but had not encountered any Fishman as of yet.

Soon the buildings were left behind, and Sasuke moved into the trees to remain unseen as they approached. The plan Nami had made going through his head.

"If we get to Arlong Park without running into anyone, then I'll head inside and see if any of them have spotted Zoro at all. You stay outside and watch for any trace of that idiot. If he is imprisoned though, then I'll cut him loose and create a distraction while you help

his escape got that!?" Nami demanded, not allowing any time for an argument.'

The navigator herself reached the doors, taking a few moments to compose herself before moving inside.

"Hey, Nami, where've you been!" one of the crew shouted to her.

"Nazu? Ummm...." Her nerves were set on high alert. The crew was gathered in the courtyard, with a solemn mood heavy in the air. Few others spared her more than a glance, but the primary source of fear to the girl was the sight of Arlong brooding in his chair.

Her enemy's hands were folded under his chin, with a murderous, silent air around himself.

"What's going on? Did something happen to one of the crew? Who dared to stand up to us?" Nami exclaimed, her acting skills painting a picture Arlong would want to see.

"Chew... I see you didn't hear about it. Where have you been lately, Nami?" Chew questioned her, mildly.

"I was finishing moving that boat out of sight from any passerby, then walked here through Cocoyoshi Village. Now news was flying about of anything out of the ordinary there, so I took it at a casual pace. What's wrong here?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose it's good that you didn't catch wind of what happened, then. If any of the villagers knew, they might be stupid enough to rise up and oppose us," Kuroobi acknowledged.

"A bounty hunter called Roronoa Zoro is here. He ran into ten of our brothers and nearly killed them. Hatchi found him at the scene of the fight and took him on. But...."

All of the Arlong Pirates began to growl, their fury both shared and deadly. None more so than the Captain himself.

"That murderous, horrible human beat Hatchi in a swordfight, Nami. That pirate hunter probably came here for my head. It's the only option that has and practical sense. Hatchi was hurt more than badly, but he's still alive."

"Damnit!" Arlong's fist slammed on the table surface, shattering it.

"One of you was hurt by an enemy. And on my account, it seems. I haven't been this furious in years, not since Big Brother Ti's death!" Arlong pledged, his rage barely contained.

Nami's hands rose to his face, her eyes and poster shaking at the news.

'No... Hatchi. Of any Fishman here, he's the one I want to see hurt the least of all. He's the only one who's been genuinely kind to me. Hatchi....'

"Can... can I see Hatchi? I want to make sure for myself that he is going to be alright. Did you kill that bounty hunter he fought with?"

"Hmmm. I'm glad to see you share our worries, Nami," Arlong replied. "Hatchi's in his room, but don't disturb him yet. No, that man... he will likely be dead soon either way. Still, I have a strong idea of what to do with-"

CCCRRRANG! "Arlong, you repulsive, foul fish! Fess it up, you sent me on a goose chase!" A new, high-pitched shrivel rang as doors were thrown open.

A Marine officer stomped through the park, ignoring the rest of the crew. That is until Arlong's eyes petrified him. The shadow of furry and death, radiating from the fishman nearly made Nazumi piss himself.

"Nazumi. For once, your timing is quite well-made. I have a favour to request from you," Arlong spoke. "One of my men was attacked by a notable bounty hunter. One Roronoa Zoro, the Pirate Hunter, came

here and attacked one of my men. I want you to take him from here, and head to the nearest Marine outpost. From what I learned; he has become a pirate as a recent career change. Will that be enough to imprison and execute him?" Arlong demanded

The rat barely moved, making Arlong impatient. As the monster rose from his chair, the crooked Marine hurriedly signalled for two of his men to move inside and find their new prisoner.

"Y-y-y-y-y-yes, A-A-A-Arlong. I'll se-se-see he's killed. But- (Chkrmummm)," the man coughed into his sleeves as he recalled why had stormed in there from the tangerine orchard.

"I was at the house you described, looking for that deposit of treasure that is such a threat to our partnership. However, it wasn't there at all. No trace of anything was found inside the house or in the surrounding orchard. Are you certain this Nami-girl has been collecting such treasure, or did she dupe you about wanting to aid her home at all? I found no treasure there and was severely disappointed."

Barely... a tick..... breath... or any sound came inside Arlong Park. Many of the Fishmen were trying not to gape, while others decided to watch the show. Arlong himself could only blink, trying to digest what just happened... right... in front... of Nami.

Sasuke was waiting outside, beneath a nearby tract. 'Damn. When those marines came here I needed to hide out of sight. According to Kakashi, they're on Arlong's payroll, so things might end up badly if-

"WHH-WHA-HUH-....ARLONG!" A deep, loud, hateful cry came from inside the building. One that left Sasuke frozen, as the tone and falls echoed his own the night of the Uchiha massacre.

Inside, unseen by the ninja, Nami stood before the pirate captain who'd served as the most painful tormentor for half her life. Her face

was a mask of horror, disgust and grief. All the fishman could do was grin.

"Why the sour face, my dear navigator?"

"What are these Marines talking about?! Did they just come back from stealing all the treasure I had? And on your invitation!?" she demanded.

"Well. I wish he hadn't spoken of it aloud. Yet it appears that treasure has now disappeared mysteriously. How fortunate for me," Arlong gloated, fixing the girl with eyes that conveyed only one feeling: possession.

Nami was close to biting her lip, trying to stifle the hate she felt at the man.

"What was all that you said about dying before breaking a promise about anything that comes to money, huh?! Why!? Our deal was 100,000,000 for the freedom of my home and myself," Nami shouted at the shark-man, her arms raised to yank at the collar of his shirt.

"Refresh my memory. Yours about that money agreement we made is quite clear. But how have I broken this promise now?" Arlong questioned her, as laughter was building in his throat.

"Don't play dumb you know that- *ghmmm*."

Arlong held a tight grasp on Nami's face, lifting the girl off her feet. Helpless before him.

"Now, nothing in our agreement spoke of a deadline, or any insurance given should that money be misplaced, or found by another party. You know that. Shwahahahahahahaha!"

Her eyes showed the frustration, betrayal and fear deep in her soul, pouring through a stream of tears as she cursed him in her head.

'Damn you....Damn you... you.....damn murderer....pig.....slaver.....'

"Too bad, all your stolen money vanished. A deal is a deal, you know that Nami, don't you?" the Fishman gleefully reminded her.

"You'll just have to start again. And in the meantime..." his eyes grew, with that horrible grin only piled additional despair into Nami's heart.

"Your map room has gone untended for a while. There is still so much more to contribute to the Arlong Empire. Allowing you to leave would be too much of a loss for me to afford."

"Without that 100,000,000 bellies, you and your village will stay in my possession indefinitely.

Shahahahahahahahahahaha!"

"Nazumi, if you find that money, it is all yours. No issue from me," Arlong promised, throwing Nami aside.

"CHichichichichichichichichi! Well to start, I apologize, Arlong. This girl's outburst means that treasure is certainly here somewhere. I only need to figure out where it is located. I doubt there will be much trouble. After all, I just shot a pair of idiots who were in my way while coming here. A stupid coward with a slingshot who only made bad lies and a girl with blue hair. This wrench's sister, apparently."

Nami could feel the icy stab through her heart; piercing the smouldering rage towards Arlong and the corner she had been forced into, this new wound thrust even deeper than betrayal or revenge. 'No....Nojiko... after Bellemere died....no... no!...'

"No! No! No! NO!" Nami exclaimed in despair. Shooting to her feet, without sparing Arlong a second look.

Her mind focused only on her last, living family. She bolted for the doors, barely staying upright, and was sprinting for her home.

Sasuke saw what happened, and quickly moved to catch up with her.

"Nami. Where is Zoro? What happen-"

"Shut up!" the girl cried, slapping out at the boy. Sasuke ducked under it, as Nami continued to run. "Zoro's inside and imprisoned," she cried without looking back. "And Nojiko got hurt! She's been shot and so has Usopp!"

The clouds above moved to cover the sun. The growing shadow loomed as it covered all the land. A darker shade in her life, and the precious few she had, was all that Nami could see.

'Please. Don't be gone. Don't let Arlong take anything and everything away from me!' she pleaded.

Sasuke stopped, watching Nami's figure retreat, before turning back towards Arlong Park and coming to a decision.

Back in Arlong Park, Zoro was running around the cell. trying to find some way out as he overheard everything that was spoken in the courtyard. 'Ussop! If any bastards hurt him, I'm gonna cut them to pieces!'

Suddenly, the lock in to door clinked, before it was thrown open. And two puzzling men strode into the room.

"Marines? What are the lot of you doing here?" Zoro questioned the familiar men in white uniforms. Both of them moved into the cell and stood before him.

Inside Arlong Park, Zor overheard most of the commotion outside. And we straining to release himself when a gaggle of Marines entered his cell.

"He's all yours," a fishman outside the door promised them. "Just get him out of here for Arlong and lock him up somewhere. The guy mentioned joining a pirate crew, so that'll be an excuse for his arrest. Otherwise, your captain Nazumi'll think of something."

The men nodded, one of them grinning with a sadist's glee. A kick hammered into Zoro's chest, causing the vice-captain to tense his face at the pain. Yet not a sound came through his lips.

"Oh, a nice tough guy, huh. It seems you lack a sense of cooperation with the Marines. It's quite despicable for a bounty hunter to sink into corruption low enough to join with pirates instead of imprisoning them," the marine scolded in a prudish, self-elevating tone, waving an admonishing figure before the swordsman.

"You clearly have no respect. So, I must dutifully take up the task to break you down, and install such morals into your consciousness," he promised, in the gloating tones of a true coward. "That simply cannot go unaddressed, or without consequence."

The man strode closer to Zoro, before drawing a knife and plunging it into the swordsman's gut. Followed by another into his shoulder, and a knee to his stomach.

"Can't let you try and break free, can we? As a bounty hunter, I'm sure you understand the dangers of moving an active, able prisoner." More followed before they applied fresh bandages and dragged the pirate out with a pistol to his head.

At the sound of the gunshot. Kakashi moved through the tree via a substitution. Shooting forward at a rapid pace, working to follow his nose to the new scent of gunpowder and blood. What he found, however... stopped the Jonin, cold.

In the middle of the pathway, Sakura was struggling with Ussop; half-dragging, half-carrying the brown-haired teen forward. The boy wasn't moving, his overalls lowered to his waist, leaving the sniper's scrawny chest exposed. Layers upon layers of soaked bandages covered his chest, with pads of gauze on his right pectoral, all of them stained crimson.

A blue-haired woman lay on the ground nearby, similarly, bandaged and clutching her shoulder. Even as she spurred Sakura on. "I'll... ehehhhh... I can hold out. Hurry-ummmhh... get him to the doctor."

"H-h-hold on Ussop. I-I'll-"

"Sakura." *Phhwww*. A new voice joined them, commanding her full attention.

Nojiko left herself lifted into a pair of strong, powerful arms. Yet, she was still alive, and soon caught the face of a masked man with grey hair.

"Kakashi-sensei!" the younger girl cried, tears of relief slipping through her eyelids. Ussop could only groan. A second Kakashi lifted the boy into his arms, to gasp at the deep crimson stain in the bandages wrapped around him.

"Sakura. The doctor who bandaged Zoro yesterday. Take me to him, immediately! And explain who did this." the jonin commanded her. A deep, passionate weight behind his words, that belied the scale and emotional chaos within Kakashi, as one of his comrades had been hurt... again.

Soon, the four were moving through the trees, with two Kakashi's guarding the wounded crew, while the original and a third clone carried them, and the kunoichi was upfront in the lead.

"Sakura," one of the clones moved up beside her. "Explain to me what happened to Ussop-san, and who this woman is," he questioned in a more subdued voice.

Sakura began to explain.

' Nojiko stood in the clearing, finishing her recount of Nami's life and predicament to the Straw Hat Pirates. Each with varying reactions.

" And that's it. We're very close to fulfilling the bargain between Arlong and Nami. If you all stay here though, it's only another burden and struggle for Nami to deal with. And all that is besides what might happen if you confront Arlong and make this situation worse for us. That is why you need to leave."

Luffy was barely bothered at all. Sakura remained composed after hearing the story before, while her fellow Genin had tears in his eyes. Naruto was barely containing his frustrations, his fists shaking with rage at the silhouette he imagined Arlong to be, and a wish to find and promise Nami to fight her enemy.

Gin took to story more measuredly, more than used to such atrocities though he found the virtual enslavement Nami had endured to be beyond disgusting. Ussop's face was strangely plain, while Snaji took a fresh smoke from his cigarette. Yosaku and Johnny were almost crying, eager to confront Arlong themselves.

Luffy himself rose to his feet, dusting off his pants before facing Nojiko directly.

" Nope."

" Excuse me?" she questioned him.

" Like I said before. We're not leaving here without Nami. If Arlong is the problem, then we'll wait until it's solved, and then she can join us. We're not going anywhere without her, though," the Straw Hat declared.

" But Captain, there's an easier answer, ya know!" Naruto cried, jumping in front of the older teen.

" Let's just go beat up Arlong! We beat Krieg in the end with only half of the crew. With all of us here, plus Kakashi-sensei, there won't be a problem, believe it! Plus, that bastard has gotta pay!"

Nojiko tried to interject, but Sakura beat her to it. "Naruto, that'll just make the situation worse. Nami wants to resolve this without violence. And besides, we don't know how strong these fishmen are. Running in like that will just cause more problems," the pinkette tried to explain. But the Uzumaki knucklehead was too stubborn.

" No way, Sakura we'll just find him, beat him up then Nami will come with us."

" Nope, we're not Naruto."

In a twirl of motion, the Genin's frowning face met Luffy; a little too cute to be taken seriously. "Whatdoya mean, Captain! Are you thinking of leaving her now?" he tried to interrogate the Rubber-man.

Luffy only glanced at him, raising his hands to rest behind his head.

" This isn't our business Naruto. So we're not going doing anything. There's no reason to butt into their affairs, it's not about us. Still, I'm not leaving without Nami. We'll just wait until she's done, then leave for the Grand Line together."

" I agree," Sanji spoke up. "Doing some odd jobs here and there to raise extra cash for Nami-swan would probably bring a solution to this problem faster. And I'd hate to leave such an amazing, strong lady under such a burden."

" NO!" Nojiko spoke up. "Didn't you all hear me? The best you can do is to leave. Just find that swordsman who went off on his own and get out of our island."

" Wait!" Ussop spoke up, as Luffy perked at the news. "Oh no! Did Zoro walk off on his own?" the sniper exclaimed.

" Um, yes?" Sakura answered. "Kakashi-sensei left to spy on Arlong this morning. He also gave instructions to Zoro about watching the coastline for the rest of you. We left him to get him on his own."

Ussop gapped at her before his forehead smacked into his palm. Luffy himself began to laugh.

" Shishishishishishishishishi! Well, guess we've gotta go find Zoro. He's probably lost somewhere. Men, let's go find our direction-stupid Vice-captain!"

Sanji and Gin blinked at the news but went along with a shrug. The group split up, with Sanji making a special request.

" Naruto and I will go with the ladies. Between my chivalry and all the clones he can make, we can protect them both from any monsters."

" Yeah, I get to protect Sakura-chan!" Naruto cried with glee. 'Then maybe she'll say yes to a date with me,' he silently wished.

But, Sakura's form slid over to block him and the pervy-chef from Nojiko. "OH... no way. Who's gonna protect Nojik-san from you, then, Romeo?"

" Yeah, Sakura-chan is right, Sanji-senpai," Naruto joined in. "You'll just keep flirting with her and not get any work done. I'll go with them alone and they'll be fine."

Both of the blondes quickly started an argument, until Ussop stepped between them.

" Okay, okay. How about this. Sakura, Nojiko, who would you prefer to be accompanied with, so we can stop these two from wasting time finding Zoro," he proposed to them.

Sakura glanced around at each of them, before finding the one who had bothered to ask her at all. "You, Ussop. How about Mr. Gin and Luffy head together, while Naruto-san and Sanji-senpai search together."

Sanji was dissatisfied but nodded to their wishes nonetheless. While Naruto began to jump in excitement.

" Okay, let's go find Zoro! Follow me!" Naruto declared, with one fist pumped high before running off, with Sanji chasing after him. Luffy did the same with Gin, leaving Ussop and the girls alone.

" Um. Do they have any idea of where you're even going? Or of where this man might be?" Nojiko questioned him.

Ussop just folded his arms, "Na, probably not."

Sakura actually took a sigh of relief. 'At least one thing is still familiar amidst all this mess. Naruto's loud, usual self without any problems. I'm still trying to digest how Sasuke-kun was so mad and aggressive towards Miss. Nami.'

" Excuse me?" the pinkette spoke up. "Perhaps starting from a place we know and then moving on to different areas around the village would be a good place to start? Like at your house, Miss. Nojiko."

The other two agreed and soon began walking back towards her house. But on their way, they had an unfortunate encounter.

¾'s of the way back, Nojiko spotted a party of marines, with their leading stomping forward in a tantrum.

" Hey, Marines. Hey, hey, over here!" Sakura began to shout. While Ussop began to sweat, unable to hide before the Marine Colonel spotted them.

" Agghh! Could this day possibly become any worse!? First, I am bamboozled by the disgusting fish into thinking a large cache of treasure is ripe to be plucked from a tangerine orchard. Then I run into you again!" Nazumi cried, ready to blow a gasket.

" Ussop-san? Do you know this Marine?" Sakura questioned her teammate.

" Uh... yeah. On the way here, this guy ran into us. Wait-!" The sniper bopped his fist into his palm.

" Back in our encounter, this guy mentioned Arlong by name. He actually said these waters were part of that guy's territory."

" Wait!" Nojiko cut off Ussop, pointing an accusing figure at the dodgy colonel. "You mentioned that monster sending you to take treasure from a tangerine field. What else did he say?"

" Quiet, civilian! That treasure is of no concern of yours, even if your village's freedom is tied to him receiving it from that thief Nami. What is of importance is the criminal before me, who assaulted a dedicated civil servant!" Nazumi had drawn his pistol, with it levelled at Ussop.

Nojiko barely moved, But Sakura did not remain quiet, her mind pouring over this news, and connecting the facts to a probable conclusion.

" Arlong sent you! You must be one of the Marines who are on his payroll. This girl here is Miss. Nami's sister and you mentioned Nami collecting treasure and the deal Arlong made with her!" the Genin declared.

" OH, did I?" Nazumi muttered, his eyes remaining on Naruto. "Well, just call it a haunch. Still, I found nothing, so that bastard must have lied to me. Or that thieving, whore Nami moved it elsewhere. Now, my patience is very thin as it is, little girl. I suggest you-"

" Ugggh!" Nojiko let out a loud cry, years of building frustration, resentment and anger building up, ready to explode. "You horrible, slimy, bastard!"

Rushing forward, all rational lost, she punched the slow-witted Marine. By luck alone, Nazumi was too off-guard to fire and squealed as he was hit.

Sakura began to reach for her kunai, while Ussop pulled out his slingshot.

" You, imbecilic, bitch!" Nazumi shrieked.

A loud bang tore through the scene. Nojiko felt a searing pain, hotter than white iron in her shoulder. The girl's eyes grew wide, her form collapsed, and she tumbled back to the ground.

" Na... mi...." she gasped.

Time began to slow for Sakura and Ussop, watching their new friend fall to her knees, and lay on her wounded shoulder.

Nazumi merely huffed at the effort, too annoyed for any gloating. "I told you I was feeling frustrated," he admonished them. "Still, one more, for good measure.

" No!" Ussop shouted, charging in front of Nojiko.

" Speical atta-" Bggaaaammmmm!

Before the Ussop could fire, Nazumi had already pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through Ussop's right pectoral and through his lung. The heroic coward's voice died in his throat, as he felt a horrible, crippling pain. It suddenly became difficult to breathe, and he couldn't even shout as he fell back, to the ground.

Sakura looked on, unmoving. The girl's mind....it was trying to digest what was happening. Everything around her faded to the background, tunnel vision forming on Nojiko and Ussop. Her consciousness was barely digesting what was happening before her, or able to compelling her to move.

Until a hand seized her by the chin, turning the girl to face its owner.

" Chichichichichichi. Quite a pretty thing," Nazumi appraised her. "Young, healthy and with room to grow. Perhaps Arong would allow me to take you to a Human Auctioning House as compensation for my wasted time."

With that, he began to leave. "Stay here, where you can easily be found again. And watch those two die for opposing Navy business."

Just as they left, Ussop began to groan, barely moving.

Sakura finally snapped out of her thoughts, enough to move. Reaching her pouch, she removed all of the bandages she could find but dropped them immediately. The girl realized her hands were shaking too much. Looking down at Ussop and Nojiko, the sight of blood beneath them brought a wave of nausea. Her last meal was threatening to pour up from her stomach.

" Help him!" Nojiko's voice cut through the girl's paralyzed state.

" He was shot in-nnnnhhhhhh...." Her wound still crippled her, while the pain cut off her commands. "... the chest. If he doesn'-nnnhhhaaa-get help soon....then the damage to-ggghhhhhhhh-... to him. It'll get worse! Bi-nnnnnn-... Bind the wound, then carry him to the doctor!" she exclaimed.

Sakura's mind grabbed those words like a lifeline. Focusing on them alone and pushing the horror to the background, she quickly removed Naruto's orange jacket. Recalling some lessons from the Konoh Academy, she placed sterile gauze around the opening, then wrapped multiple bandages around his torso. Next, she quickly moved towards Nojiko and did a similar patch job on her shoulder.

Just as she began to lift Ussop, barely able to carry him. Kakashi arrived.'

Sakura finished her account just as the group reached the village. Kakashi himself felt a fresh wave of guilt, as he carried Naruto in his arms. "Sakura, where is the doctor's office located?"

"It's right up-there he is sensei!" she pointed further up the road, where a man in a white coat was talking to Genzo.

"Doctor Nako! Help us, please!" Sakura shouted, running forward while waving for his attention. The pair of men looked over, each recognizing one of the groups that was running towards them.

Sakura fell to her knees before the doctor, while Genzo moved towards Nojiko.

"MY friend. He was shot through the chest by a pistol! Miss Nojiko has been shot in the shoulder too and-"

"Nojiko!" the doctor exclaimed. Stepping around the girl, he approached the figure carrying both patients in their arms.

"Hmm. Those patch jobs are spotty, and they both need surgery fast. Get them inside, right now!" he ordered them.

"Wait, take the boy first," Genzo ordered him. "Nojiko. What happened? How and who did this to you?"

As Dr. Nako moved Ussop inside with the real Kakashi, the one who held Nojiko addressed the older man.

"Let's move inside. It can be safer to discuss everything in there," he suggested. Genzo found the tone more of a command and obeyed without question.

Indoors, Sakura stood still, unable to sit or do anything but keep her eyes fixed on the door Dr. Nako and Kakashi had taken Ussop through. Nojiko was set down on a bed as the man carrying her began to add some additional bandages to the wound and stop the blood flow. While she explained to Genzo what had occurred with the Marines. As he took in the story, Genzo's face morphed through multiple emotions; horror, guilt, anger, and despair, before they settled on a resolute expression.

A left soon after. Giving the spare Kakashi the chance to glance around the room. His eye rested on the one kunoichi under his care.

'Sakura didn't face anything like this in Nami no Kuni, nor in Hanma Village after we arrived. Still, she found enough presence of mind to help them both after their wounds. One step at a time, I suppose. Maybe a distraction from this situation will help her,' he silently reasoned.

"Sakura." The girl didn't even turn at her sensei's voice. Until Kakashi stood up and lay one hand on her shoulder. Glancing up, she found a strangely sympathetic gaze in Kakashi's eye.

"You did well, helping Ussop. Now, we need to deal with the man who attacked him, and Arlong for taking a loophole in the deal he made with Arlong. Regardless of Nami's arrangement, one of our comrades has been hurt because of him. And that is one crime I will never allow someone to walk away from," his voice shifting from soft comfort to a steel blade.

"I want you to watch over Nojiko and wait here for him. I can track down the rest of the crew much faster and bring them here. Understand?"

Sakura nodded, as Kakashi lightly coaxed her towards the bed the second patient was resting in. He left soon after, leaving a third Kakashi to watch the doors while the real one was still inside with Naruto.

Half an hour later, Naruto and Sanji came running up the street, asking people for directions to the doctor's office. They arrived in time to see Ussop carried out by Kakashi while Dr. Nako moved towards Nojiko.

"Ussop-san! Naruto cried out, as Sanji took a fresh cigarette from his package.

"Naruto, save your energy, kid. You and I both know, the Captain isn't going to take this lying down. Contain your energy, until it's time to fight."

Kakashi nodded at him, placing Ussop in one of the hospital beds.

"Dr. Nako! How is Ussop-san?" Sakura questioned the man.

"Girl. It's horrible he got the wound at all, but the wound itself was lucky," the doctor answered, tearing off his gloves before moving on to Nojiko.

"The bullet tore through his lung but didn't hit any ribs or his spine. If that had happened, the bone fragments would've caused a lot of damage. Plus the bullet was intact instead of splintering once it got in him. Say what you will about the Marines, they kept their equipment up to par."

"Now, somebody help me get Nojiko inside to get that shoulder tended."

Sanji volunteered, completely focused and deadly serious. Nojiko was moved into the OR, while the ninjas remained beside Ussop.

The next arrivals surprised everyone. As Nami and Sasuke burst through the doors.

"Nojiko! Where is Nojiko!" the younger sister exclaimed. Kakashi was beside her in less than one second, with a calming hand on her shoulder to help the girl focus.

"Nami I found your sister just after she and Ussop were shot. The doctor is tending to her right now," he explained. Nami's hand moved to his lips, trying to stifle her emotions before moving towards the door.

Dr. Nako's voice interrupted her, but after seeing who it was, he invited her inside. Sasuke moved forward and stood with the other Team 7 members.

"Hey, Sasuke? Did you find Zoro at all?" Naruto asked him.

The Uchiha's hand curled into a fist, glaring forward as a snarl curled on his lips.

"Yeah, I found him but I couldn't help him. The guy was captured by the fishmen. After Nami found out about..." the boy swallowed as his throat grew tight. Two more were needed before his emotions were forced down, and the orphan continued...

"As Nami found out her sister was hurt, she told me Zoro-san was imprisoned within Arlong Park. I checked it out and watched as Zoro-san was brought outside. He was held at gunpoint and surrounded by 50 fishmen and another dozen of those Marines. Arlong gave him to some rat-faced idiot, who promised to execute Zoro-san once they were away from the island."

"All of the Marines, and other twenty Fishmen went with Zoro-san as an escort. Oo many for me to fight on my own, so I caught up to Nami just before she got here."

Sakura gasped, her hands rising to her gaping mouth. Naruto began to tremble, his face a picture of rage. Kakashi himself felt another stab of guilt, for letting the Marines walk away when he had the chance to prevent all of this.

Until they were distracted by a shout from outside.

"Eight long years ago! We all promised together we wouldn't spend our lives in vain!" Glancing outside, Team 7 saw everyone in the town gathering, armed for a fight. Genzo stood before them, the clear leader of the group.

"No matter what pain or humiliation we endured from Arlong, we swore to fight the long fight so Nami could meet his demand! But now, it is clear that the bastard will never let her or us be free! You all know what I describe, and we agree it is time to fight back!"

As the others look on, Nami bursts from the doctor's room, sprinting outside.

"Genzo! What are you doing!? You know what the consequences are for defying Arlong!" she shouted out, desperate to keep something in her life together after so much had fallen apart that day.

"What are you even talking about! There's no way Arlong will-" She was cut off, but Genzo wrapped one arm around her; a farewell hug to the girl who was like a daughter to him.

"Nami," he began, while each of the ninjas looked on.

"We've all known about your deal with Arlong. To buy our freedom and your own for 100,000,000 bellies."

Nami's eyes widened, as another piece of her plan, the solace from the torments she had endured, fell away to a dark abyss.

"Nojiko told us all. And so, we agreed not to make any trouble for Arlong in order for you to not be endangered. Or to suffer under another burden than the one you had already taken up. Listen," Genzo spoke, taking a step backwards, and placing both hands on Nami's shoulders.

"I know that the treasure is safe. That grey-haired ninja Kakashi hid it before the Marines arrived at your house. After he overheard Arlong making plans with that bastard who shot Nojiko to steal it. But that's not enough."

"All this has shown, is that Arlong will never honour your bargain. He'll only find another way out, keeping you by his side forever. Those fishmen..." his arms began to shake with rage.

"We have to make those filthy fishmen pay for the years they manipulated you, and us! We may never be free. But, at the very least, we can set you free from this kind of suffering! Bellemere... she would be so proud of you....were she standing here right now. I could never face her in the afterlife if I didn't know I did everything I could for you and Nojiko. But now, she has been hurt and Arlong is the source of it."

"Bellemere had the courage to give her life, for you and Nojiko. Having the same courage, while ensuring you both can live any life you choose, not one forced on you by others. That is all that I can do for you now."

As Genzo finished, more of the villagers took up a shout. All of them were united by the wish to live free, rather than trust Arlong's word or rule any further.

"Nami," Genzo faced her, for the final time. As tears began to gather in her eyes, the girl was too exhausted and lost to do anything. "Set yourself free from this village. And follow the life you want to live."

"No!" she cried, drawing a dagger towards them, trying to steady it with both hands.

"No, I-I'm not gonna let loose anyone more to that monster," she spoke, filled with desperation towards them. The girl was breathing deeply, her eyes wide and heavy with grief at everything that had happened; her world falling apart within one day.

"You'll all die." She reminded them. Only for Genzo to meet her with eyes of resignation, "We know that."

Sakura sank to her feet, amazed at the fate the entire village had chosen. Sasuke was looking back, while most of his attention was fixed on Nami.

Naruto, for once, was silent. 'They... that's like Haku running to take a hit for Zaubza. Or him tuning around to finish Gato knowing his death was coming. Or Tazuna helping his village despite facing down those kinda dangers instead of just bowing his head and doing nothing,' he recalled.

Kakashi himself look on, already making contingency plans.

Genzo himself took the knife from Nami without a single word. Turning back to the crowd, he drew a sword and ordered them,

"Move out!"

With a roar, everyone ran past Nami, until only she and the pirates remained in the town.

A door inside the clinic opened Dr. Nako and Kakashi moved outside. The doctor had wanted to join them after treating Nojiko, but Kakashi had assured him they would be needing him later. The shadow clone disappeared as the original returned, while Nami sank to her knees.

Barely a sound was made, as Nami found herself completely drained, useless, and looking back on a wasted life. Her mind was plagued by the image of Nojiko, unconscious and hurt in the clinic. Of meeting Luffy, Zoro, Ussop and the ninjas. From Nojiko's own tattoos and unconditional assurance and comfort. Of the betrayal of her rival Carina, and imprisonment by Mad Treasure.[3] Of returning home beaten, burnt and bruised, but waving it off in light of her progress.

Until her mind reached the moment Bellemere died before her eyes, and the laughter that followed.

'Shahahahahahahahaha! Shahahahahahahahahaha!
Shahohohohoho! **Shahahahahahahahahahaha!**'

Growing....insulting... the single, horrible sound was overwhelming her.

Turning to her shoulder, she glared at the tattoo, spitefully. The mark had been forced on her, a sign of her torment, enslavement, horrors and trials. The mark of the one man, who took everything from her life. Who's laughter filled her ears this very moment. As a shaky hand rose towards it, her face a glare of hatred marred with tears, the glint of her knife caught her eye.

Pure rage unfolded.

"Arlong!" she exclaimed, grasping the knife, and plunging it into herself. "Ghu-Arlong!" Another stab. *"Arlong! Arlong-Arlong! Ghu-Arlong!"*

"Miss Nami, stop!" Sakura cried, joined by Naruto, the pair ran over to grab her arm. Nami's horrified face met theirs, before knocking them both aside and proceeding to stab herself further. Kakashi and Sasuke looked on. Neither had witnessed this level of despair or hopelessness before, even in themselves.

Nami continued stabbing herself, and halfway out another figure ran out from the clinic. "Nami, no!" Nojiko screamed, seizing the hand and the knife. "Stop, stop letting him win by hurting yourself!"

" Let go of me! Please, Nojiko, let go!" Nami demanded, ripping the knife out, drawing fresh blood from the mark on her shoulder again.

"Why, you're only hurting yourself!" Nojiko cried, wrestling with her younger sister.

"Because-ghrrrr- **Because it's the only way I have left to hurt that monster!"**

Grasping Nojiko's hand to free the one holding the knife, another stab pierced Nami's shoulder, drops of blood flying out from the wound. **-Rhhe-rrhRrhaa!-It's the only thing I can take from him!"**

" I HATE HIM! EVERYTHING I HAVE, HE'S TAKEN FROM ME! THAT MONSTER! AND-AN-AND-AND I CAN'T DO ANYTHING - AAAAAAHHH!" Nami's voice reached a higher pitch, her emotions now at their worst.

Sakura could barely breathe, watching all that happen. Sasuke was not much better, recalling similar thoughts about himself, compounding the self-directed anger towards his inability to help Zoro. The one man alive he admired and held true respect for.

Kakashi was harder to read, but memories of Obito and Rin's death were coming to the forefront of his mind. And his own cry of despair after a Chidori plunged through Rin's heart.

Sanji finally came outside, but Kakashi held him back from anything. Pointing at their new arrivals.

" AAhhhhh-AHhhhhh-ARLONG! ARLONG-ARLONG! ARL-"

Finally, someone stepped forward, who could stop Nami. Luffy stood above her, grasping her wrist.

"Luffy...." Nami muttered, the knife dropping to the ground. Gin was behind him, looking onwards with a deeply serious face.

" Nami," Luffy spoke to his navigator. Causing the girl's eyes to widen, at the serious tone behind them.

"Why are you crying? What is going on?" the Straw hat Captain questioned her.

Nami took several gulps before she could speak, only in a whisper. "Arlong. He's... he's taken... taken everything I care-..ghuk..-about. My dreams... my hope....my freedom... he owns me and my life. He's....destroying everything an-and anything I have... and even hurt my sister, Nojiko."

"Ussop is hur-hurt because of him too. Shot by some Marine under... that... monster's control."

"WHAT!" Luffy exploded. Only two thoughts were running through his head: a sibling hurt by someone else, and another one of his crew injured. Looking over at the others, Kakashi and Sanji both nodded at their captain.

Nami's hand rose to her mouth, guilt for the boy who fought to save his own village creeping through her. Until a pair of hands lifted her to her feet. S

he fought back at first until her eyes met Luffy's face. The Captain's eyes were blazing white, with pupils darker than an eclipse. His mouth was pressed together, with a frown that even made Kakashi and Gin hesitant.

"Your sister got hurt? And this same bastard shot Ussop! All because of this Arlong, guy?!" he demanded from her, as molten rage began to churn in his soul.

Nami could only whimper. Broken, as blood dripped down her arm, and only Luffys' support kept her upright. Before nodding her head. With eyes of pure defeat, and unable to stop her crying, she turned to one... final... hope... left to her....."Arlong....he did...

... Luffy. Help me," she begged from him.

Luffy's eyes were now hidden by his hat. Before he wrapped the girl in his arms. Nami responded to his hug, leaning in the one tiny solace that remained, clutching it to stay alive. Her head leaned into the crook of his neck, as her body shuddered at the comfort.

For a moment, Luffy just held her. His gaze passed over each of his crew one at a time; Zoro was still missing, but each person there was looking to him to say the words they knew were coming. Kakashi himself stumbled back a step, amazed at the sheer determination and will in the captain's eyes.

"Where is Zoro?" Luffy questioned them. Sasuke stepped forward. "He won a fight with some of Arlong's crew. But the rest of them defeated him and imprisoned him in their fortress. Arlong gave him to a couple of the crooked Marines to execute him," the Uchiha shared. Naturally, Luffy's face began to twist, his rage driven even higher.

"Old Man Kakashi! Go stop those villagers from being stupid!" Luffy commanded him. Kakashi nodded before he vanished in a substitution. As Luffy turned back to his navigator.

"Nami," slowly, the girl looked up. Luffy brought one hand to his hat, while the other held the girl on her feet. Soon the straw hat, Luffy's treasure, was planted on Nami's head, leaving her in a sense of awe.

"We're friends, Nami. Of, course we'll help you," Luffy pledged to her. "But even bigger than that. This Arlong guy. He hurt Zoro. His Marine friend hurt Ussop. And You The MOST."

" HE'S GONNA PAAAAAAAAYYYYY!"

End.

[1] -After watching Zoro vs. Mihawk, the swordsman has done the impossible. He managed to get Sasuke to use honourifics to address him.

[2] -The pilot-Arc of One Piece. 153 rd Branch is where Ax-Hand Morgan was station, where Nami snuck in to swipe a map of the Grand Line, that had already been taken by Buggy.

[3] -One Piece: Heart of the Gold, and One Piece: Gold.

Phew... this chapter had a lot squeezed into it, and it took more than a while to short everything in a way I was satisfied with. Although, I also enjoyed writing about Sakura, Kakashi and Sasuke the most. Developing them a bit further and exploring a side to Sasuke that I find other writers do not often comprehend.

Also, I wanted to giving Arlong due credit in this chapter. Horrible though he is, even monsters have their own set of morals. To me, he is a far more compelling villain, and a perfect foil, to Don Krieg. Krieg was extremely delusional over the realities of his ambitions, was exceedingly impatient, and viewed all those under his command as expendable. Arlong deeply treasured each of his crew, following an unbreakable code of brotherhood between them, had deep patience for his ambitions, and had great physical might.

I am very excited to write about him, as out of all the enemies the Mugiwara have made. Arlong is one of the few who values his crew first and foremost almost as much as Luffy does.

Now, three different members of Luffy's crew have suffered at Arlong's hands. The stakes have been raised for one hell-of-a-brawl.

He's Gonna Pay

Growth Through Chaos: Chapter 14:

"... He made my Navigator Cry.

HE'S GONNA PAY!"

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece.

Tap... tap... tap....tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. Naruto stood beside Luffy, cross his arms with one heel taping on the ground, growing with impatience. Most of the Straw Hats stood inside the Doctor's office. Usopp had been treated by Dr. Noto and moved by Gin and Sanji to one of the beds. Waiting for Kakashi's return.

Sasuke had begun to pace, adding to the background noise, while the girls and Dr. Noto were behind a curtain. Nami still wore Luffy's hat and was lying down topless on the bed, her head resting in Nojiko's lap with the doctor stitching up her shoulder. Sakura stood close by holding a medical tray with various instruments, using the purpose of the task to focus past everything she had seen.

As Nami winced at another suture, Nojiko began to murmur encouragement to her in a soft voice, before a new question came to her mind. "Nami? Are you sure these guys can help at all? They are the only chance we've got, but can they actually beat Arlong and his crew?"

"Yes." The sisters turned towards Sakura, who's face had grown hard, focused, with eyes that held only the truth.

"Before we came here; Kakashi-sensei, Naruto, Sasuke-kun and I had to free a village that had been enslaved by a man named Gato. Gato was at least as bad as Arlong, and he hired another really ninja named Zabuza-san to kill someone we needed to protect. Zabuza-san was on Kakashi-sensei's level, but Naruto and Sasuke-kun managed to catch him off-guard and beat his partner, Haku. We freed the entire nation from Gato, together.

"As for the Luffy-san, Usopp-san, and Zoro-san," Sakura looked at Nami, with a pleading glint in her eyes.

"Miss. Nami once described to me how she, and those three saved another village from a dangerous pirate crew before. Right?"

Nami's mouth drew a thin line, nodding at her friend and sister, downcast with guilt.

'Back then, I wanted to run away until Luffy yelled at me about helping my friends. And now here I am, and Usopp got hurt because of problems here in my village.'

"Back at the Baratie," Sakura continued. "Naruto-san, Luffy-san, Sanji-senpai and Gin-san must have defeated another Pirate, Don Krieg, in the battle after we departed from there. Don Krieg had a bounty of 17,000,000 bellies, and over one hundred men under him. Yet they still won, and even got one of Don Krieg's own men to come over to our side. That has got to count for something."

"Of-course it does," Luffy's voice cut through them from outside the curtain.

"Back then, Bastard-Krieg even used poison-gas and tried to kill his own men when I made him mad enough. At the end, none of that bastard's fancy weapons could stop me, and I completely destroyed him. But that was after Naruto got poisoned saving Gin and me."

Even without seeing him, each of the girls could feel the seething rage in Luffy's voice. "Naruto... he got hurt with I wasn't looking.

That's why I destroyed Bastard-Krieg." He continued, with a dethatched voice that belied the explosion building within the Straw Hat captain.

A moment of silence followed. Until the tell-tale sound of cracking knuckles, promising imminent pain, brought the wait to an end.

"Arlong and his Marine friend have got a lot to pay for. With What happened to Zoro, to Usopp, and especially to Nami! I swear I'll beat the crap outa all of them so, so **hard**, then send those bastards flying out just like I did to Buggy."

With a flap, the entire curtain was thrown aside by Luffy. Following an outcry from Nami. Sakura and Nojiko quickly became a screen as she slipped a shirt back on. Luffy ignored all of it, and stood before his wounded, near-broken nakama. "Nami. You saw what I did to Red-Nose after he hurt my hat."

"Shanks himself gave me that hat, after he saved my life. But the one thing that matters more than it is my crew," Luffy declared, the blazing passion in his eyes causing the ladies and old man to shake. Nami's trembling hand rose to the keepsake resting on her head, recalling Luffy's words and attitude towards the precious gift.

"I promised Shanks that I'd return the hat to him someday, after I become the King of the Pirates. The problem. I'm a terrible sailor. I definitely can't cook. I don't know how to use swords. I can't even lie." Usopp's cry of indignation went ignored as Luffy continued.

"I'm not a good shot. And my powers aren't as awesome as a ninja's. Without my friends I'd be dead a long time ago. The one thing I can do, is protect my nakama and if any of them get hurt, then I will rip the one who did it apart!"

At this pledge, a sensation of empowerment was creeping into the souls of the crew, Luffy's tone building with each word: "Now, that happened twice in a row, first to Naruto, and now to Zoro, Usopp and Nami!... I... am... beyond... furious!" Luffy's declaration shook to whole house.

Nobody moved, until a clapping-sound came from the doorway.

Kakashi stood there, clapping his hands with a rare look of admiration clear to see. Yosaku and Johnny were beside him, sharing a mood of desperation alongside several minor and moderate wounds.

"Well, spoken, Captain. The town's people are safe now, just outside in the square. I also ran into these two on the way and brought them up to speed. Now-"

"GOOD!" Luffy begin to stomp towards the doorway. "Then let's go. First, we save Zoro, then go beat up Arlong." Sanij, Gin and the Genin began to follow their Captain, until Kakashi's arm. blocked Luffy's path.

"Kakashi! Zoro's in trouble and Arlong's probably laughing right now! We gotta find them now. Move that arm before I throw it away!" the raven-haired teen demanded from him.

"Yeah, Sensei, we've gotta save Zoro, then beat-up this Arlong guy, Believe It!" Naruto exclaimed to support Luffy. Even Sasuke stepped forward to voice his desires.

"We know where they are, and they need to pay for what happened. Right now! What is there to wait for!?" the Uchiha demanded, more impatiently than Naruto.

"Slow down, and plan," Kakashi replied, stopping his Genin and the other occupants inside, immediately. Each felt a new presence from the eldest crewmate among them. They were not dealing with Hakashi Kakashi, the tardy, porn-loving, lazy-ass...

This was someone else... the man who could even fill the Demon of the Mist with terror... Copy-nin Kakashi, ANBU, Jonin, and legend... out to save and avenge a wronged comrade.

"Running about will carry too many risks to be acceptable. What is more, you don't understand the full situation, captain," the ninja responded, as three contrasting eyes met one another: two with burning anger towards one, singular focus; the other a frozen anger with broader awareness

"When I met them, Johnny and Yosaku here informed me that they encountered a group of Fishmen pirates who mentioned Zoro. It devolved into a fight, hence their injured state, after the group insulted their friend, and two of them won, narrowly," Kakashi described.

Everyone else turned towards the beaten-up bounty hunters, who nodded. "Yeah, those bastards were gloating about Zoro getting imprisoned and about to be killed," Yosaku confessed. "We couldn't let them walk away after that, even with Big-sis Nami's problem. Then we came back here to get help and ran into Kakashi and a crowd of people, before talking them into coming back here."

Nami looked over, her eyes falling down until her unhurt shoulder was covered with a familiar hand. Nojiko's eyes carried a clear message: 'stop bemoaning how everything has fallen apart. Appeasing them is not important any longer.' She nodded, which did not go unnoticed from Kakashi.

"First, here are our objectives," Kakashi spoke-up, calling the attention of all assembled.

"Zoro's rescue is the most immediate concern. The Marines are the ones with him and responsible for hurting Usopp and Nojiko. Then, we need to remove Arlong and his crew from this island. I got to Nami's house before the Marine's did and hid her treasure haul away."

Several eyes from wide, with shock and respect. Gin was impressed with Kakashi's capacity for planning and prioritizing, while Sanji shared those sentiments. Nami herself felt a badly-needed wave of relief.

"Nami. Tell me everything you know about the Fishman here, and the Marines," Kakashi requested from her. "On the way here, Zoro, Sasuke, Sakura and I ran into a giant Sea-cow that nearly ate our boat. I beat it and trapped that creature on the bottom of the ocean."

"You fought with Momoo and beat him!" Nami cried with incredulity. Even Dr. Nako and Nojiko were bewildered.

"Momoo? That giant thing had a name?" Sakura questioned her, before giving a shrug. "Uh, probably not important. But yes, Kakashi-sensei used certain water-style jutsu to push that sea-monster back, then trapped him underwater."

"Who, really, seriously!" Naruto exclaimed. "Kakashi-sensei, you beat-up a sea-monster! That's awesome! Hey, Sasuke!?" the spastic, overeager Genin had his collar yanked by Sasuke, who was glaring with impatience for action.

"Yeah, Kakashi did fight and defeat a big one, but stay focused on this fight, dobe," the other Genin demanded from him. "But, if Nami recognized that creature. Then it must have been associated with Arlong. If it didn't encounter Naruto's group, then it must still be trapped down there, and won't participate in this fight."

Nami blinked at the revelation, feeling the enormity of such odds facing the group shrink by a minor degree. Luffy's arms were folded, even more impatient than Sasuke, too focused to share in the excitement. While Kakashi nodded at Sasuke.

"Good awareness, Sasuke. On top of that, Zoro defeated a little under one dozen Fishmen plus one of them who fought using six different swords. Johnny and Yosaku also cut another ten of their numbers down. Nami, how many does that leave us from Arlong's crew and who are the stronger members?"

Those assembled turned towards their navigator. Even Luffy became more focused on Nami instead of rushing off.

"Umm... well, in total there are around 60 members of the crew. Arlong himself is the best fighter out of the crew; aside from his strength and powerful teeth, he also likes to use a giant saw-blade in any fight. Aside from the one who Zoro beat, Hatchan, the other really strong ones are the officers Chew and Kuroobi. One has a long mouth and teal-blue skin, and the other is a manta-ray Fishman with grey skin. Kuroobi is the more dangerous and cautious of the two, with a lot of skill in a martial art called Fishman karate. I never figured-out how it's supposed to work, though. He never trusted me at all and was the most hurtful and despicable after Arlong."

Kakashi nodded, while Sanji's foot began to tap, eager to meet this Kouroobi himself.

"Those who were beaten by Zoro, Johnny and Yosaku may or may not have some capacity to fight by now," the former ANBU captain proceeded.

"The main problem we have, is how once Arlong finds the men that Yosaku and Johnny defeated, he will probably move into the village again to find them. Best case scenario is they ransack the place, worst case, they take hostages or kill a few of your people to send a message."

"We need to keep him, and his crew focused on us to prevent that. But Zoro's rescue can't wait until after an attack on Arlong."

"So, both will need to be done at the same time. Yet, Nami and Usopp are in no condition to fight and our mission is to win without losing any of the civilians here. So, to defeat a crew of perhaps 20 Marines and 40 Fishmen plus three prominent fighters; we only have one rubber man, one cook, one ruthless and honourable outlaw, three Genin-level ninjas, two average bounty-hunters, and me." Kakashi summarized.

Sakura swallowed, fearful of the odds they were up against as her intellect put the pieces together. Naruto and Sasuke were too

determined to care, while Sanji lit a fresh cigarette and shared a look with Gin.

"And that's only half of it," the blonde cook spoke-up. "You're right, Kakashi-san. The swordsman, Zoro-san, needs to be rescued as soon as possible to avoid him ending-up killed. So, we'll need to split up into two groups. One to bring the fight to Arlong, to other to save one of our own. Personally, I think Naruto should come to help us deal with Arlong. Thanks to that cloning-technique he can use, we will be able to even-out their numbers."

Kakashi nodded, while Naruto grinned, a ball of excitement growing in his stomach.

"Slow down a touch, Sanji-san," Gin added. "Naruto's still not all set for a battle. Th' Doctor we met commented that some o'the MH5 poison ain't left his system yet. Tha'll be an issue in a fight th' like of which we're headin' for. Plus, if any o' Arlong's men are outside their base then they'll sure as hell come'ere an' attack the town for payback."

"Good observation Gin-san," Kakashi nodded at their more recent comrade.

"So, we have three roles to fulfill. One group attacks Arlong Park, a second rescues Zoro, and some need to stay within Cocoyoshi Village to protect Nami and Usopp and act as reserves if something unexpected happens," The legendary ninja surmised.

"Well, I know where I'm going," Johnny spoke up, stepping forward to grab everyone's attention. "If big-bro Zoro's in trouble, Yosaku and I are going after him, no matter what. If Sasuke-san comes with us, we can save him quickly then come directly back here to make sure the town stays safe or join the fight at Arlong park."

"Maybe, not." Both of the older friends turned to face Gin, who had a dangerously gleeful look in his eyes.

"Th' two o' you're bounty hunters. A public attack on th' Marines like may take your livelihood away or leave a black-mark agains' anyone you meet from this day on. Don Luffy, I've already got'a bounty on my head, and can take more'an'a few dozen Marines with a good plan," the grin of a demon slipping over his face at the prospect.

"What if Sasuke an' I took care of Zoro then joined you at Arlong Park?" the Man-Demon proposed.

Luffy glanced at him before folding his arms.

"Sounds good. I already promised to fight Arlong and anyone with him. Still, the Marines shot Usopp too, so I owe them one big beat-down," the stubborn youth declared, cracking his knuckles all the while.

"Make sure he hurts a lot, while the rest of us go to Arlong Park. That's all there is, right?" Gin and Sasuke nodded, while the others sweat-dropped at Luffy missing the third and fourth points; protecting the wounded and leaving the civilians out of the fight.

Kakashi of the Sharingan eyed both possibilities, looking around at the group to marshal his own thoughts.

'I want to keep Sakura, Naruto and Sasuke away from the worst of this fight. I have the most fire-power out of everyone here, and Captain Luffy did prove at the Baratie that he is a notable fighter in his own right. The two of us and Sanji are the most skilled here, that I know of, but I can track Zoro by scent faster than anyone else. On the flip side, I've been using shadow-clones all day and that can take its toll, while water-jutsu would likely be a good foil these Fishmen.'

Luffy looked around at his crew. "Okay. So, who here can move the fastest to catch-up with Zoro, and who wants to come with me and beat-up Arlong?"

On the pathway between the villages of the Conomi Islands, a party of fifteen Fishmen were returning to Arlong Park with the coastline nearby. One of the group was laden with a sack filled with bellies, as another glanced at the load with an air of greed and satisfaction.

"I gotta say, it was good everyone in Yabusa Village got the message over what happened to Gosa Village. After we turned that place upside-down as literally as possible, everyone was almost begging to appease us or give even more money for the boss. Good to see the vermin learned their place beneath us so well."

The entire group agreed, beginning to erupt with laughter.

"Yeah, sending the fifteen of us was overkill, but I like the fear that all those humans display whenever we stride in to their homes."

"I haven't heard truer words in decades, Kaneshiro. A good day of... work for... Brothers!"

The Fishman carrying the sack of money dropped his load, before sprinting towards a group of fellow Fishmen beaten and bloodied near the road. The rest looked on in confusion, before joining the other to help their comrades.

"Who did this to all you guys?" one of the crew demanded, while others tried to bind the many wounds any way they could find.

"Uuuuhhhhgggg....some... bounty hunters," a single, wounded Fishman explained.

"The pair were associates of Roronoa Zoro; the guy who beat-up Hatchi. We tried to take their weapons when a single one announced who and what they were. After we mentioned Roronoa Zoro and how he's gonna die, the two of them started a fight with us, then took off running towards Cocoyoshi village."

The Fishman Kaneshiro nodded. Soon the wounded Arlong pirates were good enough to move. Five of the other party began to carry

them back towards their home, with the money for Arlong. The remaining ten dove for the water, to reach Cocoyoshi Village by the fastest route and kill any they found until the Bounty hunters were found and executed for defying Arlong's will.

Elsewhere, six people were approaching the gates to Arlong Park, while the Fishmen remained inside, oblivious to the coming assault. From the group two began to stride ahead from the others, one of the pair glancing aside at her companion.

"This is only the first play. Let's hope they accept," her partner gave a reassuring reminder. At their words the girl glanced backwards, to find the others nodding their own consent despite the thrill to get stuck in a fight burning through their blood.

"Ready?" "Yes. For this nightmare to end."

A loud knock rang on the doors, causing the activities inside to pause. Without waiting for an answer, the stone doorway creaked open, with the first party shifting through.

"Swahahaha! So, my pretty little Navigator returns, empty and ready to return to work with her proper sensibilities. And who is this man beside you, Nami?" Arlong proclaimed. Nami herself forced the fresh wave of tears down, refusing to satisfy the monster. Then schooled her featured into focused detachment, while Kakashi stood at her side; glaring at the possessive smugness Arlong carried, alongside his guest.

"AHhh. I recall this man, Arlong. He was apparently entertaining this Nami's sister and was quite helpful to me moments earlier. Though I do not recall finding his name, Uuuhhh-!" Nazumi described, before scampering back under Kakashi's glare.

"Arlong? I am here with a proposition for you," the Jonin announced, as he strode forward, opening one pocket of his flak-jacket to withdraw a pair of storage scrolls.

"Well, let's hear it. What can this human offer to me that is not already within reach?" the Fishman acquiesced. Kakashi made a single hand-sign, resulting in columns of smoke billowing from the scrolls. As it cleared, an enormous collective of treasure was there, sprawling before the eyes of the Fishmen and their snivelling guest. Nazumi nearly squealed at the sight of such treasure while Arlong was gapping in shock. All part of Kakashi's plan, as he locked eyes with Nazumi.

"Arlong," Nami gasped, his fists trembling by her hips. "Here it is, 100,000,000 bellies exact."

Her declaration left the Shark-Fishman struck with dismay and amazement, while Nazumi dashed forward for the treasure.

"Chichichi! Money, mon-" the rat was clothes-lined by Kakashi's arm, then flung back to collide with one of the pillars near the porch.

"This man beside me found this treasure before that rat could take it. Together, with others, I got enough to for our deal. The money's here, with a proposal," Nami declared. As Arlong face morphed into a savage frown. The man's own deck-chair broke under his grip at this turn of events.

"Let's my village be free, and it's yours," Nami pleaded towards him, uncaring for the fear Arlong invoked with her. "That was our agreement, and I have delivered. So-"

"Silence, you sum!" Arlong roared, dashing forward to seize Nami, but halted in his tracks. Looking down, the Fishman felt a trickle of apprehension. The masked figure whom accompanied Nami had planted on hand over Arlong's chest, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"Now. I did not introduce my, Arlong-san," Kakashi gently murmured, barely high enough to be heard.

"My name is Hatake Kakashi. You don't know me, but I have been watching you. Nami has fulfilled your bargain, and that Marine you

are allied with needs to die."

"You see, I owe Nami-san one favour. And a crewmate of mine was nearly killed by that rat, and another threatened to be placed in the slave-trade. I was present at Nami's home when he arrived looking to seize this treasure and mentioned something about informing Marine HQ about you after taking this loot and pocket a bonus and promotion from your downfall."

"What! Are you being truthful with me!" Arlong demanded, his eyes leaving Nami to focus on the Marine who was just crawling to his feet.

"Hmm. Well, I thank you Kakashi. I wouldn't put it past that self-centred disgusting human. Should that be the case, you may kill him if you wish, once I am finished." Arlong declared, turning about towards the crooked Marine while two of his men grasped Nazumi's arms. Kakashi's smile was hidden behind a mask, while Nami looked on, praying.

"Nazumi!" Arlong bellowed, yanking the Marine off his feet, restoring him to consciousness, and a set of brown stains in his pants. "Our contract has ended!" throwing the man into the pools with a splash. Then the captain turned back towards Nami, eying her and the treasure, before his gut twisted into knots.

'Damn! I was too hasty!' Arlong silently cursed. 'He was my way out of this deal with Nami! With that ended and the full amount right here, right now, I need....'

Kakashi looked on, 'he suddenly became contemplative. I need a distraction.

"Captain Arlong?"

"What?!" the Fishman bellowed, as Kakashi raised both arms to placate him.

"From what I learned from that Marine and Nami-san herself. You made a deal to ensure the freedom of her village for this precise amount of money, correct?" The assembly of pirates nodded, while Nami adopted an air of defeat.

"Well then, I would hate to create such an inconvenience for the owner of the island I am standing on. Did your deal, by chance, specifically determine that she would be released once it was fulfilled, or only her village?"

"What!? K-K-Kakashi-san! You said you would help me!" Nami exclaimed, while Arlong's eyes began to clear, finding the answer he needed. "Now that I think back on it... No. Her concerns were solely towards the freedom of her home. The girl was not added in the finer details. Shwahahahahahahahahaha hahaha" he declared, before seizing Nami by her jacket with one arm.

"I suppose I can let the village go free, as part of our deal. But you. You, my beautiful Nami will stay here until all the end of time! This day is beginning to look up after all! 100,000,000 bellies added to my treasury, the removal of a traitorous bastard, the arrival of a far more amicable acquaintance, and I get to keep my favourite possession-"

BAAAAAMMM! Arlong's celebration was cut short, as part of his front door was struck, with a fresh imprint of a foot set in the metal. Another followed, matching the one that came before.

"Sanji? Weren't we supposed to wait?"

"After what he just said about Nami-swan, I'm not staying still any longer!"

"About time!" a voice outside exclaimed, before the doors were blasted off their hinges, flying open before a pair of arms.

"What! Hhhhh," Kakashi sighed. While the dust settled, four figures stood before the Arlong pirates, ready for a fight. One was dressed in grey clothes with red line designs, with golden tan kin and dark hair

surrounded with a grey and blue head-band. He was the only figure clearly armed, with twin tonfas in his hands, and a pistol in his belt. Adjacent to him was very handsomely dressed, bedecked in a suit with handsome blonde hair and a single curling eyebrow. He stood easily; one hand pocketed while another held a cigarette. The centre figure ahead of the others was the youngest, clad in an open, sleeveless red vest and jean shorts that ended at his knees. Steam billowed from his nose, while one foot planted down; a bull preparing to charge.

"Which one of you is Arlong?" the leader demanded, scanning the courtyard.

"Huh! What is going on?" Kuroobi growled. "Another masked man is there, identical to the one talking with the boss!" Sure enough, the last person in the doorway had impossibly wild grey-hair and a face hidden behind a mask, and attire that suggested he was military.

Before Arlong could ask the say question, a sensation of water began trickling over his hand, from Nami. Or, who appeared to be Nami. Once his returned to the one in his grasp, Nami was grinning as she dissolved into water.

"Huh! Wha' the! Sea-water!?" Arlong barely registered what was going on, as the first "Kakashi" suddenly wrapped him in a bear-hug. And exploded with lightning!

"GUHAHAAAAA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HAAAAHAHOOOWWWWWOOOAAAHHHHH!" The Fishman exclaimed, as lighting continued searing through his body. Smoke and the scent of burnt flesh filled everyone's nostrils. Soaked by the soluble sea-water, the lightning's impact carried substantial damage, while fixing Arlong in the spot. A perfect target.

"Gum-gum:" Luffy's voice rang through the yard, his arms shooting backwards, fixing Arlong with deep loathing. "Bazooka!" Every Fishman's jaw dropped, watching two arms speed forwards and impact Arlong dead in his chest, sending him barrelling through the

air and shooting through the opposite wall. Knocking him senseless, for a brief time.

"I don't think that'll every got old," the suave smoker muttered, grinning with satisfaction.

"I have to agree with you on that, Sanji," Gin replied.

Luffy's arms were retracting, before he stood high and turned towards the Kakashi to his left. "How was that?"

"Well, you came in far too early. Arlong hadn't made any concrete deals for the village to be free no matter this outcome. To be captain, leadership often requires more patience, Captain Luffy," the Jonin lazily admonished him.

"Na, I don't care. Those other you's were taking too long, and it's more fun this way. Stop keeping all of it for yourself, old man Kakashi!" Luffy brushed him aside, while Kakashi sweat-dropped. "I'm only 26, not an old man."

"Still, you're eldest out of us, Kakashi. Th' Don's words do have some merit," Gin chimed in. "Stop complainin' 'bout the sequence. Th' results are more th'n good. And how many differen' kind o' clones can you make?"

"Well, some have called me the man with a Thousand jutsu for good reason," as the second Kakashi nodded, as Luffy strode forward, facing down all of the Arlong Pirates.

"I am Monkey D. Luffy. A Pirate Captain. And I'm here to challenge all of you fishy bastards for hurting Nami, my crew member!"

Across the island, a party of Marines were surrounding their prisoner, moving him down a pathway. They were not alone as a towering Fishman strode along beside the green-haired bounty hunter, wearing a pair of katana strapped to his back. Chew could not keep

the grin off his face every time one of the corrupt Marines struck Zoro along, trying to make the swordsman shout in pain.

'This human certainly has some grit, even if he is a piece of crap. This treatment really is fitting comeuppance for what he did to Hatchi,' the smelt-whiting Fishman spared him a passing thought. Unaware that the group was being shadowed.

"What're we waiting for? He's right there and easy to rescue. My clones could charge in, beat up them all, and grab Zoro-san no problem, believe it!" Naruto let out a whisper, louder than he meant for, towards Sasuke. Both were crouching low in the treeline, Naruto giddy to catapult into action, Sasuke focused with deep intensity, itching to use several Fuam-shuriken in a pack slung over his back. Now incensed teammate was fixing the blonde with a glare, ready to admonish him, before their partner spoke up first.

"Naruto. That attitude caused you to nearly die back at the Baratie and we had to save you from Krieg and his crew, twice," their third member cautioned him.

"This part of the mission is about something you are supposed to be able to do better than any of us. Grabbing their attention with unpredictable chaos."

The boy chuckled, rubbing the back of his head, "Uh, y-yeah. Sorry, I'm just a little excited that I didn't think."

"You're always too excited to think, Naruto. But you're not wrong about getting Zoro-san out of there and fast." Sasuke acknowledged, his patience made thinner by watching another Marine slamming the butt of a rifle into Zoro's chest. "Let's wait for the right moment then ambush them with your clones. I can follow-up with Shuriken for more precision. That'll create the opening to grab Zoro and move him out of there."

"Not a bad plan Sasuke," the third member acknowledged, another Kakashi. "The both of you need to distract them quickly, otherwise

the Marines might kill Zoro before I can take him. Get your clones out there, Naruto."

Sasuke nodded, while Naruto grinned. "Shadow-clone jutsu," he whispered, producing several copies, all of whom nodded as with Kakashi handed them a storage scroll. "Hmm! Time to put all that paint to good use. And Sasuke, how many times did you call my hobby useless?"

The Uchiha rejected the bait, grasping Naruto by his collar, "Then get into position. Stay quiet dobe, and let's get this right." Naruto, for his own part, nodded. Shaking off Sasuke's hand, the pair moved on while Kakashi looked on with a pang from the past.

'They were acting just like me and...' the Hatake sighed deeply, recalling his own demeanor towards Obito and the parallels Sasuke had just shown.

'It's good to see they get along far better than before. Sasuke at least is going this to save a friend, Zoro-san, while Naruto is starting to put their rivalry aside.'

None of this was noticed by the Marines who continued towards their destination. Moving another hundred meters up the road. Before pure chaos unfurled!

"Huh!" "Wha-the-AAH!" "My eyes, it's in my eyes!" "Ghakk-PLaa-plab-my mouth!"

"Wha-what the-how the hell... chew!"

The Fishman blinked on reflex, hearing pop of air-cannons and splattering waves of paint coat him head-to-foot, while the Marines began shouting in bewilderment.

Colour of purple, yellow, brown, rustic red and, unfailingly, orange were exploding around them, flying over the road.

Brushing the slop from his face, the Fishman looked about, finding the entire clearing covered with stripes of paint, surrounded by walls of smoke. As the thin clouds began to clear, a small army surrounded him and the marines, each figure a diminutive human in orange jump-suits, and everyone exactly the same.

"Is this an attack!" "Devil-fruit powers? I never believed any stories like that before!"

"This has gotta be a trick!" the Marines, complacent with corruption, barely held any sense of discipline, raising their swords or rifles in various directions.

"Charge! Let's go save Zoro!" Several of the beings shouted, as 50 beings converged on the party of eleven enemies. Sauske's teeth began to grind at Naruto's exclamation, and quickly readied his shuriken. The spinning stars arced through the air, cutting down three marines that surrounded Zoro and wounding several more, his accuracy dead-on-target through practiced skill and his Sharingans.

Chew was turning towards Zoro at the outset, in-time to watch the other Marines cut by strange knives. Rifles and pistols began to fire, yet each of the attackers that were hit simply dissolved into smoke, screening the others as they closed-in. The Fishman turned about, scanning the tree-line for the ranged fighter as various swords and guns were kicked skywards.

The Naruto clones ganged up every Marine, kicking some around while disarming others before pummeling them with barrage after barrage of kicks. Chew was a far harder target, knocking aside several dozen of them easily but still gawking as none did any more than dissolve.

"Crap! Wha-What stupid son-of-a-bitch has a power like this!" he exclaimed, watching more of the same attackers pouring from the forest. "They're here to help Zoro. I just gotta-HHHHHH!"

Chew's realization was cut-off, as a solid hold was claspings his ankle, than yanked him underground until the Fishman was neck-deep in the dirt.

Zoro was equally surprised, with layers of realization, 'Naruto's here? Luffy and the others must have arrived too,' just as those thoughts passed in his mind, something yanked him aside.

"Huh-!" Zoro exclaimed, glancing down to see a disembodied arm grasping his leg, and Kakashi's face.

"Yo, Vice-Captain. Time to go!"

"Wha-ghuu-rrr!" The swordsman could not reply, forcibly yanked underground. Below, Kakashi kept him in a firm grip while moving through the earth away from the battle.

"Kakashi-san? What is going on? And how are you doing this?" Zoro demanded from him.

"Earth-style: Hidden-like-a-mole jutsu," the ninja explained. "I can travel through the earth, almost like swimming, through my chakra to make a quick escape, or do something more unexpected. A lot of things have happened. Short version: Nami's sister and Usopp were shot by Marines. They aren't dead, but between that and Arlong's abuse, Nami broke and began stabbing herself in an emotional breakdown. Luffy saw it and learned what happened to you. He wants to fight Arlong's crew because of what he did to her, you and Usopp. Sanji and Gin from the Baratie are here as well, as are Johnny and Yosaku. Naruto and Sasuke are up there distracting the marines while I get you to a hospital nearby."

Zoro were speechless for a time, digesting all the news. Before glaring into space. "Then Arlong is as good as dead."

Back with Naruto and Sasuke, the fight was nearly over. Sasuke watched as every trace of Zoro and Kakashi slipped away, before turning a pair of hate-filled eyes at the Marines.

'Time to make them pay,' the avenger decided, in a blunder.

"Fire-style: Great Fireball jutsu!" Sasuke began, producing a steady fire-stream that engulfed the road, burning the remainder of the Marines. Even the ground beneath them cracked under the flames, taking all of Naruto's remaining clones with it.

"Sasuke!" Naruto exclaimed, with only the Uchiha's Sharingans allowing him to avoid a bonk on the head.

"What the hell was that!" the original Uzumaki was exclaiming, his arms wildly flailing before pointing at the battle-site. "You could'a burned me down there, and my clones already had everything handled. Come on, that's really being a bad teammate!"

"Hhm," Sasuke brushed him off, turning to move into the trees. "Kakashi had already moved Zoro-san away. Besides, my fire-jutsu can cause a lot more suffering than your clones. Just let it go,"

"Hey, where're you going, ya know?" Naruto demanded, as Sasuke kept looking ahead. "To Arlong Park. The rest of this fight is there, and it's time to link-up with the others."

Naruto grimaced at the Uchiha until-"Boss look-out!" One of Naruto's remaining clones exclaimed.

Suddenly, the orange-clad ninja was several meters away, and watching Chew attack the spot he had just been shouting from. Sasuke whirled around, in-time to see the Fishman with two swords drawn nearly kill Naruto, until the clone who sounded an alarm substituted itself with the original at the... final... moment.

Chew's face was a smoldering wreck, his blonde hair burnt away, lips cracked and scared, with burns checked across his neck and shoulders. Glancing up, the Fishman hateful gaze met Sasuke.

"You damned son-of-a-bitch. Those flames of yours hurt a lot. But they weakened the ground around me enough to pull myself out of

that hole. And now, it's time for the both of you to die!"

The Fishman bull-rushed the tree Sasuke was perched from, stabbing both swords through the bark. With the strength all Fishman carried, 10 -old stronger than humans, Chew tore the trunk from the earth beneath it with furry in his eyes.

Sasuke kept his grip with chakra, before his spot nearly collided with another tree, inciting him to jump. Landing on his feet, the boy barely dodged a kick from his enemy. Chew was far from done, draw his blades free, working up a frenzy of slashes toward Sasuke.

"And after that, I'm takin Nami back to Alrong Park myself to shackle her to her work desk until the end of all time. And give her the same kinda burns both of you have caused to me!"

His blades finally hit, stabbing Sasuke through the heart. Chew was grinning with elation, until "Sasuke" was engulfed with smoke, leaving one tree stump in place with Chew's katana stuck through it.

"WHa! Huh! Now this one disappears too!"

"I... don't... believe this! Chew!" the Fishman began exclaiming, his face growing pink.

Sasuke was hidden behind a tree, his gut plummeting downward. Raising a trembling hand, the prodigy reflected over how his own short-sighted firry blunder had given the enemy a way out, and nearly ended with Naruto's death had that one clone not been present.

'How... how could I have been so stupid? Letting him get free?' Sasuke admonished himself. In the background of his mind, two series of words began to voice different answers. "' *Foolish little brother. You're hate is not strong enough. You are not strong enough.*" Itachi,' Sasuke recalled with dripping venom, before another memory echoed in his mind.

"Your hatred is eating you up inside. Making you unfocused and weak... we're stuck in a pretty dangerous place....I need to trust that you will care and support us, not just yourself. Otherwise, you are no different than Itachi." Kakashi,' he recalled, feeling new clarity pass through his head.

'I....I used that fire-ball jutsu of hatred, and Naruto could have been killed, even as my back was turned on him!' Sasuke realized, turning back to the battle to see Naruto being forced into a corner by Chew.

"No!" Sasuke exclaimed, shooting forward while pulling two fuma-shuriken from his pack. "Don't you dare!" calling Chew's enraged attention to him before tossing the shuriken. The more experienced Fishman parried both of them with his blades while Naruto slipped away from his own predicament. Sasuke was already moving, catching the larger shuriken off their ricochets, and landing beside Naruto.

"Naruto. That was a blunder, I will admit that. Let's end this guy quickly so he can't move back to Arlong Park," the Uchiha proposed. Naruto blinked, looking over his teammate in surprise, before nodding his head and raising two hands.

"Shadow-clone jutsu!" another 2 dozen clones appeared, blocking the path towards that direction. Chew himself glared at the pair, before he noticed a pond off to his left.

"If you think that'll stop me, I'll blast it apart with my squirt-canon!"

Taking off towards the pond, Chew was still beset by shuriken from the two ninjas, but even those that hit were barely more than a painful nuance for the pirate. Quickly, reaching the water he dove in head-first.

'Down here, that fire-ball can't hit me, and I can gather water for- ahhhhhh,' Chew sighed in relief. The cool water was soothing the burns covering his upper torso and face. He took a moment, indulging this sensation before gathering water into his mouth.

Naruto and Sasuke looked on, confused for several moments. "Hey, Sasuke. I'm gonna go sneak around, then hit the guy when he comes out of the water, okay?" Sasuke nodded, his eyes trained on the pond. After Naruto disappeared, a splash came to the surface and the Sharingan's watched to next attack with awe.

"Payback Water-canon!" a visually obese Chew declared. Immediately the source of the fish-man's new girth became evident, launching a giant blast of water through the trees. Each and every Naruto-clone was destroyed as the focused blast collided with the forest, tearing trees from their stumps and leaving even a deep gauge in the earth.

Sasuke had evaded with a substitution and now stayed hidden, while Naruto looked over in awe. 'I hope Sasuke is okay, because I can't think of anything to counter a water-move like that, and all he has is fire. Still....' Turning his eyes back towards Chew, Naruto spied the Fishman bending down to gather more water. With their enemy's butt point high in the air, the blonde got an idea and pulled out one kunai.

Sasuke looked around, keeping his eyes on Chew. 'Damn, and I don't have any earth-style jutsu to counter a move like that. If I can predict those blasts and get close enough things can be different. Naruto is still out there though, maybe-?'

Looking out, the boy's Sharingan picked-up the chakra of one Naruto in the opposite tree-line, and another moving towards him. Soon, the clone was right beside him.

"Hey? Sasuke?" came a hushed whisper. "The other me has an idea. You and I need to keep this guy distracted so he can move and hit him with something really bad. Okay?"

Sasuke glanced at the other Naruto puzzlingly. 'Well, something is better than nothing.'

"Okay," he decided.

"Squirt-Machine-Gun!" Chew announced his next attack, combing through the forest in an arc.

'He's searching for us with the attack!' Sasuke realized. "Alright." Quickly, Sasuke made several Academy illusion clones.

"Hey! Your accuracy and power are the worst I have ever see before!" the three clones began shouting, then scattering through the trees, leaving the real Sasuke hidden and giving Naruto a good distraction.

"Huh?! More copies of you too! Die you blasted boy! Chew." Chew declared. For nearly a minute, the fish-man's water-shots began combing the area but failed to hit any of the Sasuke's. While Naruto moved into position.

'Now I just gotta wait until it's the best target.'

"Damn it, where the other one of you-chew!" their enemy cried as his water-gun ran empty.

"Right here behind you!" Naruto cried, shooting forwards as Chew bent over to reload.

"Here it goes!" the boy exclaimed, honing-in on his target.

"Take this! Hidden Leaf Village Secret Taijutsu! Straight form the teachings of Kakashi-sensei!" Naruto exclaimed, thrusting forth a kunai with both hands.

"One-Thousand Years Of Death!"

11

**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG
G! MY**

[illegible]

Came a shout that shook the island. Sasuke was frozen, watching the kunai sunk into Chew's exposed rump.

The Uchiha wanted to face-palm, watching Naruto scampering away from Chew with a cheeky smirk. Until... their enemy turned around to attack the fleeing Naruto, and Sasuke noticed something. Or, rather, four things attached to the kunai, with smoke billowing from each one.

"Boom," the original Naruto and the clone muttered.

Chew, who could only look confounded before an explosion engulfed him. Naruto just got behind a tree for cover when it went-off, the blast sending water skywards, causing a light drizzle to cover them.

After the smoke cleared, both Genin looked back to find a very blackened and oblivious Chew, stuck on his feet and literally smoking. A moment followed, until, slowly, the fish-man's legs gave way; his form collapsing forward, face-down, with the kunai still stuck downstairs.

Sasuke moved forward, cautiously and was soon joined by Naruto.

"Hahahaha! Yeah! It worked, and he's totally out! Believe it!" Naruto was cheering loudly, while Sasuke looked over at his teammate, in quiet amazement and embarrassment.

'When Kakashi said "Unpredictable chaos," I doubt he could have imagined even this,' the boy grimaced. This went on for a while, until Sasuke shook his head.

"Naruto! Help me tie-up this guy. Then let's head over to Arlong Park and see if the others need help," he suggested, pulling ninja-wire from his pouch.

"Huh? Oh yeah, good idea, Sasuke."

Back in Cocoyoshi Village, Sakura looked out across the town from the porch of Dr. Nako's clinic. Most of the towns people were

gathered inside, crowding the area and growing anxious for news. Genzo was watching over Nojiko and Nami. Johnny and Yosaku were present too, kept watch for any dangers and impatient for Naruto, Sasuke and a Kakashi shadow-clone to return with Zoro.

Sakura herself took one-deep breath, noticing her hands had begun twitching again. She tried to push down the dread of ignorance over what was happening elsewhere with her crew and her teammates.

"Hey, little-sis?" Johnny stepped forward, placing one hand on Sakura's shoulder. "You're doing well. Wanna check those traps or set-up a few more? They were a great idea and seemed to kill a lot of the tension in you," he suggested to her.

"Uhhh. Y-yes. Thank you, Johnny-san," Sakura replied, standing up beside the bounty-hunter.

Together, both of them began moving about the streets and alleys of the village, checking various contraptions Sakura had suggested to Kakashi before everyone had left. All were in working order, but Sakura kept glancing over the road to see if someone, anyone, was approaching.

"Ummm... Johnny-san?" she questioned her temporary partner.

"Yeah, what's up?"

"How... how are you so... so calm about all of this? Especially with Zoro hurt and the others fighting one entire pirate crew, a Grand Line crew, with only four people? While we just wait here?" she questioned the older man.

Johnny, to his credit, simply glanced at her, with a deep sense of seriousness. "What makes you think I am calm, little-sis Sakura?" The girl blinked at this answer, while Genzo walked up to the pair and stood nearby, following their conversation.

"I'm more worried right now than any time before in my life, especially about big-bro Zoro. But... I don't know. Right now, I'm just looking beyond that from experience, ready for any fight to come or see him walking down the road," Johnny explained.

"That, and I like the idea of protect this town, truth be told."

The girl blinked at this answer, while the bounty-hunter turned aside, looking up the road.

"You see. Part of the reason I became a bounty hunter was from watching others when I was a little kid. In my home village, a lot of criminals would come through town and make things hard on us. But, right behind them were the bounty hunters who would fight-off those bandits and drag them away. I grew up with those guys as my heroes. And now...."

The man steadily clasped the broadsword at his hip. Slowly, deliberately, the weapon was drawn and held up before Johnny's eyes. "Now, I'm right here doin' the same thing, for people who really need it. Focusing on that and trusting that the others will get through this. That's what I'm doing right now."

Genzo looked over at the younger man, with a growing sense of respect. Sakura herself began to tilt her head, until-

"Enemies!" Yosaku's voice rang out from the roof of the clinic. "A group of ten Fishmen are in the water and coming this way!"

Genzo whirled about, fear emblazoned on his face. Sakura and Johnny were sprinting back to the clinic. Nami and Nojiko met them at the door, both sisters with their shoulders heavily bandaged.

"Do you think they failed!? Johnny, was Arlong with them!?" Nami shouted up to the roof.

"Nah! It's one group alone, I don't see Arlong with them at all, from Big-bro Kakashi's transformation!" he replied, recalling the power the

Jonin had used to show them the Fishman he had identified while spying in Arlong Park before leaving with Luffy, Sanji and Gin.

"Still, they look really mad and are coming in armed!" the bounty-hunter described, hopping down from the roof to the ground.

"Everyone, get out here an-"

"No!" Sakura shouted, cutting-off Genzo's orders.

"Genzo-san! Is...." The girl's mind began to race, trying to recall what to do from her Academy classes. Umino Iruka's voice coming through her detailed memory.

'Should the goal of a mission be to defend anything, distance from respective dangers is a golden rule. Avoid them if they approach and you have an inanimate object or work to keep a living client away from any form a danger. Even if you are between them and the threat, just having the client present is not the optimal situation. Avoiding such risks altogether or placing them in a safer location then drawing danger to yourself is the better choice.'

Sakura looked up, to find everyone's eyes on her. "Ummm..."

"What is it little-sis!? They're getting closer!" Johnny began urging her. Swallowing back her fears, Sakura fixed her eyes on a wall and let the ideas spill from her voice.

"Nobody who lives here has any kind of training or skills for fighting. Our goal is to protect all the people. Not lead them into a fight or place them at risk. If they can move somewhere safer, then Johnny, Yosaku and I can fight the Fishmen here in the village then join-up with you there."

Everyone looked at her, before Nami nodded. "Sakura is right. Genzo, Nojiko! Can you both get everybody to the Tangerine orchard?" she questioned her sister and surrogate-father.

"Us? What about you Nami?" Genzo demanded, still wishing to stay and fight. Slowly, Nami's arm rose, touching the hat resting on her brow, Luffy's words coursing through her ears. *"What are you doing! These guys are your friends!... I fight anyone who hurts them!... Without my friends I'd be dead a long time ago. The one thing I can do, is protect my nakama!"* '

'My friends... Luffy... the others... all of the mare fighting on my behalf right now,' Nami recalled, clenching the token she had been entrusted with. Some emboldening spirit coursing through her heart.

"I'm staying here to help them," the Straw Hat navigator announced, pulling out the bo-sections from her shirt and linking each together.

"I've been in a few fights with Luffy, Zoro and Usopp before we came here, and survived this long. With Luffy and the other's fighting for me... I want to pitch-in as well."

Genzo was about to argue, until Nami's face stopped him and Nojiko both. The same taciturn, driven expression that she wore around Arlong had returned; save for the burning fire in her eyes. A fire that hadn't been present before, invoking a shakenly echo in Genzo.

'Bellemere...' the man silently recalled. 'She had this same look on her face. The day she chose to join the Navy, and the moments before she was killed.' Catching the same look on Nami struck the man's heart, but someone else stepped up before he could say anything.

"If you want to stay or leave, get going now!" Johnny ordered them, hefting his sword up and ready. "We only have minutes until they get here, so you gonna go or what?" Yosaku encouraged them.

Nami stepped forward to stand beside Sakura, who took a measure of assurance from her company. Genzo's eyes shifted between them all, before cursing himself. Grabbing Nojiko, both ran into the clinic and began herding everyone out the back.

"I'll be back the moment they are safe. Don't let a single figure touch Nami!" he demanded from the group. Dr. Nako stayed behind, with Usopp in the clinic to avoid moving the wounded boy.

Soon the town was deserted, as Sakura and the others waited for their enemies to arrive. The pinkette quickly combed over a few ideas, before giving the others suggestions and moving to hide close by.

Within 10 minutes, the Fishman arrived. Half the group splintered, forcing doors open to ransack certain houses, combing around for the people and their prey. Many began shouting, growing angered to find the homes deserted and nobody in-sight. Kaneshiro began glancing around, until his eyes rested on Nami.

"Hey, Nami, good you're here!" he shouted, waving her down. "Where did all the scum here disappear to!? Some human bounty-hunters beat-up a group of us, and they're with Roronoa Zoro, the hunter that attacked Hatchi! Get down here and get people out in the open so we can weed them out!"

No reply came.

Nami simply looked on, her face shadowed by the straw hat, confronting the scum before her. A strong breeze fell over the town, fluttering the hat, blowing the surface clear for the coming confrontation.

"Did you hear me!?" Kaneshiro shouted. "You are a fellow Arlong-pirate, aren't you? So, get here and pull some weight to-"

"Fuck Arlong." Nami spoke, heavy with her feelings. A boiling-pot of loathing disgust spilling in her words. "Fuck Arlong, and all of you go to hell," she began to cry; the words held for years in her heart finally able to be spoken.

"If more of you got hurt, then all the better! You really think I was ever one of you after Arlong killed my mother! Never! I despise him,

his ideals and the mark he forced on to me more than anything in this world!" Slowly, Nami's form began shifting, feeling the weight of nearly a decade lifted off her shoulders. She was panting deeply yet had not felt so true to herself within her own home for ages.

The Fishman were recoiling in shock, before anger clouded their judgement and all fixed Nami with their own loathing. "You scum! Betraying us like that and taking about marks forced up another! You have no idea how many of our kind were given that, and what these marks truly mean!" Kaneshiro declared, pointing more at the Sun-Pirates mark on his chest. As two being stepped forward.

"Yeah, well whatever marks you've got, they still make you our enemies," Yosaku announced, standing in front of Nami, with Johnny shoulder-to-shoulder. "I admit, we did just beat more of you, just by a bit. But if you're anything like them, this won't be very hard at all," Johnny gloated, baiting their foes.

"You! You're the ones we want. I bet Nami hired them and Zoro to come here and attack Arlong!" one of the Fishmen declared. At those words, each of them charged forward, eager for blood.

As Sakura smirked from a corner, shifting a kunai in-hand to cut the trap-wire.

Immediately, three dozen logs, covered with iron kitchen-ware, stuck the Fishman in the heads or arms, dropping from above. Another moment later, Sakura, Yoasku and Johnny each threw handfuls of smoke-bombs into the group, stunning each Fishman further. Sakura herself raised one hand, hesitating a moment at the idea of carnage,

'Uhhhh....ummmm...'

"Gahk! You'll pay for that! Each of you will die and after that I'm gonna find these villagers, tear their children apart before them and-

BRRRUUUUUUUUUUMMM!

At the mention of others hurt and children endanger, Sakura triggered the explosives. Paper-bombs she had hidden with loose layers of dirt in the middle of road, far from the buildings enough to leave them untouched, and several of Usopp's exploding stars, triggered by the kinetic force of the first explosions.

Sakura grimaced at the smoke-column with new focus, 'No... not like the Land of Waves was. I won't let people get hurt like that, or... or just watch and do nothing... like... like with Nojiko-san and Usopp-san were...' her thoughts trailed away, as Johnny and Yosaku charged.

Each of them started on different sides, mowing through the smoke to take-out the Fishman any way they could. Many were struck down, while Nami watched and relaxed.

"Nami, you are dead!" a hateful voice exclaimed. Nami's eyes shot open, finding a single blue-skinned Fishman had come through and was charged her. The man had a single Oodachi-sword raised overhead, barely feet from his target. Nami tried to raise her staff, but her shoulder gave out, searing with pain.

"Ahhhh!" dropping to the ground, her head drooped forward, her neck beneath the short orange hair clear to see, and behead.

The shadow of death fell over Nami...

....1 second....pink hairs, freshly cut, were scattering in the air.

Luffy stood before the Fishmen, cracking his own knuckles and impatient for the beat-down to begin. Arlong was shaking his head, while the crew who followed him began to show a smoldering rage; Kuroobi greater than the others.

"You're attacking us on Nami's behalf, as if she were part of you?" he demanded from them. To which Luffy simply nodded.

"Yup. Nami's my navigator, so she can't spend time here making maps from Arlong. I can't let that happen, and Arlong hurt her enough, so I've gotta give you a big butt-whoopin'. Plus..." a new haze began covering Luffy's eyes, straight towards a Marine with whiskers on his face.

"Old-man Kakashi? Is that the one. The Marine who shot Usopp and hurt Nami's sister?"

The Jonin could only nod. "That is the one, Captain Luffy."

"Well, then if he's on the same side as these bozos, then that's even more reason to rip them apart," Luffy declared, to the fury of the Fishmen.

"Who or what the hell could make a human possess such an impossible and fatal idea?! The only bozo going down here is you!"

At those words, fifteen of the Arlong pirates charged straight for Luffy. None of them even came within arm's reach, their efforts stopped by two wraiths darting in to meet them. Sanji was moving left, dropping for a hand-stand and twirling about, knocking half of them aside, until reaching the last. This one felt the chef's foot hook around his neck.

"Reception!" With the cry, Sanji shifting himself around, slamming the Fishman's face straight into the concrete. Before dropping his other foot down on the back of another, producing a sickening crack.

Gin was on Luffy's right, shifting around as his tonfa's met the knees, elbows and necks of their opponents. Several were dislocated or broken from his strength and technique, the final one struck in the chest sufficiently to send the Fishmen flying backwards straight into Arlong.

"Luffy, Kakashi, quite hogging all the action. Gin and I want a piece of these bastards ourselves," Sanji petitioned the other two.

"He's right. Don Luffy, leave this enemy's underlings to us," Gin commented, standing tall in the centre of Arlong park. "Kakashi can act from a distance, while you save your strength for the enemy captain."

"Heh! None of you are going to get even close to him at all!" Kuroobi declared, standing tall and ready in his Fishman-karate Gi.

"Someone go and wake-up Hatchi. He's doesn't have to fight, but only make that trumpet-call to bring Momoo here. And then we can-"

"Boss, boss! Hey, who the hell are you!" a new voice came, behind the Straw Hats.

Luffy turned about, while Kakashi, Gin and Sanji didn't let their awareness waver from the more immediate threat.

"Take! Where were you, and what happened to your party!?" Kuroobi shouted, recognizing the voice but could not see his crewmate beyond the enemies blocking them.

"We found more of our brother's beaten-up badly! They were attacked by a pair of bounty-hunters who confessed they are here with Roronoa Zoro. All of them are right here and-"

"What! More! How, how are so many things fall apart!" Pandemonium began to course form the ranks of the Arlong Pirates. Until a certain idiot spoke-up.

"Oh. That must be the guys Johnny and Yosaku ran into. And they're not with Zoro. Zoro is with me," Luffy announced, jabbing one thumb at himself.

"Zoro is my Vice-Captain now. Are you guys picked a fight with him and then took him away and hurt him. That's another reason I gotta kick your ass!"

All the people there blinked... once... twice....

"Kill them!" Kuroobi ordered, all of the crew charging to get stuck in the fight. Gin and Sanji could only shake their heads, while Luffy faced-down the charging crew.

"Oh, you all want some more! Well then Gum-Gum-"

"No! Captain Luffy, go beat-up those guys behind us!"

"Huh!? Oh, okay," the simple-minded fighter decided, on Kakashi's directions. Pivoting around, Luffy struck out with his leg, extending the limb backwards through the air.

"Gum-gum: Whip!" in a twist, the rubbery leg scythed through the air, catching each of the Fishmen in its wake and launching the party out towards that sea, past a few hundred meters.

Kakashi kept his eye on the battle, watching Gin and Sanji hold their own nearly back to back, and noticing several Fishmen begin diving into the pools.

'No!' the ninja began weaving hand-signs. "Lightning-style: Discharging bolts!" between his fingers, Kakashi summoned tendrils of lighting courses over themselves, before casting out towards the water. A sizzling flash followed, mixed with dozens of air-bubbles breaking the surface. After a single moment, the forms of another dozen Fishmen reached the surface, their prostrated forms twitching with multiple electric jolts, knocked-out and cooked.

Now the Fishmen could only fight the pirates on dry land, not sprout forth from the water.

At the same time, Gin was moving through more of their enemies, revelling in the thrill of conflict with a clear consciousness.

'Yes, this is how battle truly should be, skill and direct confrontations, with cunning where the impacts make the greatest change. I'm more at home here than with any of the underhanded ploys Don Krieg

decided with.' His commitment to Luffy growing with each foe he struck, Gin advanced too far, exposed to a blind-strike from behind.

"Hyakumaigawara Seiken!" Kuroobi shouted, bearing towards the Man-demon to strike him in the back. His target froze, the instinct born from battle rising to warn of the strike too late, as Kuroobi and the other Fishmen grinned at the oncoming sight of knocking him down.

Kakashi noticed this, as did their fourth crew member.

"Epaule Shoot!" Sanji got their first, a flying kick connecting with the Kuroobi's shoulder to deflect the punch, as the other foot curled over his throat. "Collier," and the Fishman struck the ground hard enough to crack solid concrete.

Elsewhere kunai and shuriken sliced around the pair and Gin, meeting the wrists and ankles of each Fishman homing in on the latter. At their cries, Gin's instincts kicked in, striking down each of the wounded foes before they could rally. Kakashi didn't spare a nod at his own work, instead drawing two kunai and moving to the left, working his own way through the remaining Fishmen with the full skill that all high-class Jonin carried.

Within seconds, each of them was out of the fight, while the Jonin sensei thought back to his own Genin with worry.

Nami couldn't move, darkness covering her form as the Fish-man's blade moved downwards.

"No!" "Ummmph!"

It was 1 second....pink hairs scattered through the air.

In that span, Sakura had seen the danger and acted just barely enough. The girl substituted herself with a barrel positioned close to Nami, then immediately moved for her friend, channeling a burst of

chakra through her legs and arms. Her chakra-control refined from Kakashi's training at the Baratie, the girl executed the speed to reach Nami, and strength to push her aside.

The Fishman began glaring at the pink strands of hair, the only things he managed to cut. Both girls began breathing hard, Sakura on her knees as the Fishman moved to attack again. Her eyes wide in terror, the Genin could only raise a single kunai towards his sword, with both hands and hope.

"Exploding star!"

A fresh explosion hit the fish-man's face. Before one person in brown overalls appeared, hurling through the doorway, with a hammer in-hand.

"Usopp-Hammer!" the strike would even make a seasoned Marine cringe, sending the fish-man spinning before he crashed to the side. Yet, Usopp did not let-up, a fresh gong ringing through the scene with each hit.

"Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer! Rubber-band of Dooooom! Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer U-Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer! Usopp Hammer!"

It went on for another minute. Until the Fishman's face was rendered more bruised than blue. Sakura looked over, her eyes comprehending Usopp's panting figure and the fresh pool of blood at his feet, while Yosaku and Johnny were dealing with the last few enemies.

"You idiot! You're gonna open that wound again! Nami, are you hurt?" Dr. Nako admonished him, bolting through the door to grasp Usopp as the boy collapsed. As he looked over them both and found Nami unhurt, the doctor approached Sakura, resting one hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, girl. Thank you, for saving Nami. Those traps of your worked splendidly, but there still are a few enemies left," he reminded her pointing at the field, where three Fishmen remained, with Johnny and Yosaku blocked them from others.

Sakura nodded, pushing aside any other thoughts to pick herself up. Looking around the field, she executed another substitution with a barrel behind the Fishmen and was running towards the ground.

Pushing- off with her legs, Sakura launched a signature black-leg style kick at one of their heads, knocking him towards the bounty hunters, the grinning as they immediately punched him in the face. Sakura herself pushed off that foe's back, twirling about the deliver a spinning round-house at another with her heel. The girl form was well, but also deeply straining on her body. So much that up landing before the last one in a crouch, the final enemy snatched her by the hair, hold the girl up before himself.

"Nobody moves! You have hurt my brother's enough. One more thing, and I will kill this one!" he demanded.

"Sakura-chan!" Nami exclaimed, starting to run forwards, while Johnny and Yosaku grew worried, "Little-sis!"

Sakura struggled against this enemy, the pain on her scalp running deep, "Ow, ow, Put me down! Let go! Let go!" Sakura's hands rose above her head, clawing at the strong fingers while her legs were flailing about with each word.

"Let me go!" as her heel slammed into something very, very soft, squishy, and sensitive.

"Hoooooooooooooooo!" the Fishman suddenly began howling in a high alto, dropping Sakura to the ground.

Looking back, the girl noticed her enemy was curling forwards, and took a chance.

"Get out!" she cried, shooting one last chakra-enhanced high-kick into his jaw, knocking him over backwards, and into oblivion.

Slowly, the Genin Kunoichi began panting from the action, and her own exertions. Until a single hand began to rub through her hair.

"Here... does that make the soreness a little better?" Nami asked, gently stroking Sakura's hair with a particular grin on her face.

"Hmhmhmhm! That really was a nice hit, Sakura-chan. You really showed him not to mess with you again."

"Huh? What do you mean, Miss. Nami? I just kicked him," Sakura replied, confused.

"Just kicked him!?" Johnny squeaked out, calling Sakura's attention towards him. The bounty-hunters had dropped their swords, so both hands could cover their groins, protectively.

"Little-sis, Sakura! You kicked him right in his ruts, down below! I think I got hurt just seeing that happen!" Yosaku fearfully recalled.

Sakura herself blinked, before Nami brushed it all aside.

"Ok. You beat every here, so this village is safe again. For now...." As her voice grew shakenly, trailing off, Nami stumbled backwards.

"Huh? What is it Miss. Nami?" Sakura asked, lightly stroking the older girls' arm.

"Zoro!" With a scream of fear and worry, Nami took off, calling Johnny, Yosaku and Sakura to watch her, and spot the other two approaching them further ahead.

"Big-bro Zoro!" Yosaku and Johnny's voices shook the town, both sprinting forward to help their close friend. Sure enough Kakashi was carrying Zoro inside, one arm around the teen's waist, the other holding his arm draped over Kakashi's shoulders.

Sakura's hands flew to her mouth, falling backwards to the ground in terrified awe towards Zoro's wounds. Her crewmate appeared to be dyed exclusively red, accented with dense black marks across his face. Still, what stopped her, stopped all of them was the look in Zoro's eyes.

"Get the doctor to patch me up, again. Then, we're heading to Arlong Park for the others."

Inside Arlong park, the Fishman captain regained consciousness. Shaking his head, the man felt another figure on top of himself. Realizing it was one of his brothers, Arlong carefully lifted him aside, only to find the sight of a nightmare. 90% of the Arlong pirates were strewn around their base, beaten in one way or another.

Kuooobi was standing aside, squaring off with a blonde human, while another adorned with a grey coat and red dragons was glancing about, beside a third masked human who was doing the same.

"What... the... hell!" Arlong brokenly demanded, trying to absorb all the he saw.

"Oh, Captain. You're awake again. Please, let me deal with these scum, then we need to deal with Nami. That traitor requested these bastards attack us, betraying the trust and loyalty all of us have shown that harlot! After all these year-ghhhrk!"

Kuroobi's voice was cut-off, by a single leg honing towards his face. The martial-artist caught the kick, turning it aside to counter with a solid punch. Yet his target ducked their head, flowing with the move and landing with both feet on the ground. Without missing a beat, Sanji drove one heel straight upwards, forcing his opponent to back-flip away.

"She is no harlot!" The cook demanded, his face the picture of gentlemanly anger. "Nobody like you, the source of her torment and

agony, can be allowed to speak so rudely about such an indomitable, unconquerable beauty as Nami-swan!"

"Hh. And what do you know about her, filthy human," Kuroobi scoffed in response. "That girl betrayed her own family and home just for money and power the Arlong Pirates will achieve, one day. But now, that will never happen, instead I'll track her down and imprison her permanently. That garbage needs to be straightened out, with any kind of resistance pummelled out of her."

Sanji's form became frozen, rigid and unmoving. Just as Gin and Kakashi defeated the last of their enemies, he drew the cigarette from his mouth, dropping it before stomping down.

"Everybody, back away!" Sanji roared, pointing his arm directly towards Kuroobi.

"I challenge you a duel. One pirate to another, here and now. Do you accept, or have too much cowardice and mediocre skill with Fishman-karate to place it on the line?"

Arlong looked over towards them, his mouth curling into a knowing smirk at the human's words. "Ohhhhh... the fool really should not have said that to Kuroobi."

Said Fishman was fuming, equal to Sanji, but clear and self-centred, not subdued and selfless.

"You dare, to mock my mastery of Fishman-karate! I'm a level 40 Dan in this art," he declared.

"On my honour as a master and proud officer under Captain Arlong, I accept your request."

Sanji merely nodded, while Gin stepped aside, dragging Kakashi with him. "Come on, Kakashi-san, but keep'an eye on Arlong. I wouldn't put it past him to try somethin'."

Elsewhere, both Captain met other another's eyes, nodding at their crewmate's request. The field was left open. "Hey, Sanji. Do you very best and barbeque that stupid fish!"

"Aye-aye, Captain," the cook promised, grinning eagerly, "of course, a fish can never fight a cook, otherwise the chef would be beaten by seafood."

"Kuroobi! Crush that insolent bastard!" Arlong ordered his own man.

"With the deepest pleasure, Captain. Feel the power of the art you have insulted!" Kuroobi roared, closing in on Sanji within seconds. The Fishman struck out with his own front-kick. Sanji misjudged the range and was hit to his chest. The blow sent him crashing into the wall of Arlong park.

An imprint of his body was left behind him, while the Straw Hats began to shout in worry. Kuroobi merely sneered, dropping his pose to face the other pirates.

"That was truly a most pathetic display, come on, Arlong, let's rip these-!"

"Selle!" Another hard strike hit Kuroobi, directly to the lower back. The Fishman tumbled forward from the impact, before pushing past the agony to his feet.

"Don't you dare think a weak hit like that will finish me!" Sanji's voice came to his ears.

"Oh, hey Sanji! Good to see you're okay!" Luffy shouted over.

"Please, you have no need to worry yourself Captain. Old Man Zeff's kicks were a hundred times worse than this guy can do. And I never even died," he assured them. Causing Kakashi to raise one eyebrow, 'if that is true.....maybe letting my Genin train with him was not such a good idea.'

Back in the fight, neither Sanji or Kuroobi wasted time, one charging forwards while the other rose to their feet and braced his form. Sanji began raining kick and kick on the Fishman, who's arms moved in economic, minimal blocks. Kuroobi's strong arms, honed by his martial training, intercepted every kick at the ankle to stop them cold; each move honed to a reflexive edge, totally controlled with maximum results.

Sanji backed off for a moment, then began forming cartwheels around his enemy to flank them. Kuroobi moved fist, catching Sanji's leg and lifting the chef over his head. Sanji hit the ground hard, leaving a dent in the concrete slab and coughing blood from the impact.

The chef did not give in, but neither did Kuroobi step. In less than a beat, Sanji was air-born, but only throw lightly. He was suspended for a second, before Kuroobi's arm struck upwards, driving his dorsal-fin into the cook.

Sanji's agony came through his voice, his body heavily damaged by the hit. Closing both eyes for a second, the image of Nami, stabbing herself in desire filled his vision... pulling at one painful memory of a boy, forcibly clad in an iron mask, sharing his own tears with Vinsmoke Renji, begging to escape his own nightmare. Thoughts of that time led to the cook's pain-filled face curling into a snarl.

Spinning with the hit, Sanji's leg hooked around Kuroobi's neck, before twisting again to ax-kick the opposite leg to the bastard's face.

"Face-shot!"

The impact even made the "Man-Demon" Gin grimace. Kuroobi hit the concrete, hard, but Sanji was not finished. Immediately, the cook shoved his enemy towards the pool, forcing two of his limbs into the water. The instant Kuroobi's arm hit the water, the Fishman began shouting:

"GGGGHHKLKKKkkkkkhhhgguuuuuhhhh!" Trails of electricity coursed through his body, producing a sickly-sweet scent of burned flesh from Kuroobi's arm and hand.

Sanji looked on, uncaring, but his curly eyebrow raised as Kuroobi still pushed himself to his feet. "You. You really don't ge-get it do you," he demanded, almost desperately trying to hold on to a singular belief. "It-it doesn't m-matter..w-what you do'ta me... or whate-ever hit I ta-take," he gasped, stuttering as the lingering jolts of lightning rattled through his form.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH MY
BBUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU UUUUUUUUUTTT!" A
fresh cry shook the island, from somewhere in the forest.

"Hey, that sounded like Chew! What the hell is going on around here!?" Arlong demanded. Kakashi merely looked over, until a certain memory cross through his mind.

"Well... I believe that was from the men you sent to move Roronoa Zoro, to be executed. The other members of our merry band went after him, and I can firmly say they succeeded in saving Zoro-san."

Arlong stood rigid, while Kuroobi ignored the implication entirely.

"Heh, don't ev-even try to gloat-t. Such a co-oncept is impo-ossible. Now yo-you will wi-witness-s th-the true p-power of F-fish-man-n Kar-arate! Senmaigawara Seiken!" Mustering his will to command his body, the Fish-man raised one arm, but before his own "ultimate attack" could be thrown, Sanji was moving first.

"Collar!" Sanji's right leg struck the exact spot between his target's neck and shoulder. "Flank!" another kick connected to Kuroobi's side, forcing the Fishman to tumble over himself. "Lower Back!" A solid heel dug into the Fishman's spine; forcing his head to rise. "Chin!" a fourth strike rocked Kuroobi's face, knocking him half-way to oblivion. "Ribs!" the final strike sent the Fishman flying this time, but, again, only enough to hang in the air for the final finisher.

"Anti-Manners Kick Course!" A single rising kick struck Kuroobi in his side. Hard enough to shatter half the Fishman's ribs, crack part of his spine, and launch the battered man skywards several meters beyond Arlong park.

Sanji merely lit a fresh cigarette, knowing his victory had been won. "That will suffice for his insults against Nami-swan. And then-"

"Sanji!"

"Shark Darts!"

"Rocket!"

Sanji whirled about at Arlong voice, before a single arm clasped over his shoulder, and another form shot towards him. Looking out towards its owner, Luffy was barrelling towards Sanji at break-neck speed.

"What are you doing you-!"

"AAHHHGGGRKKK!"...

The sound of dropping blood echoed through the battleground. Sanji could barely speak. Before him, Arlong had tried to attack the chef whilst his back was turned. Before his jagged nose could piece the cook through his heart, Luffy got there first. The Captain saw what was coming the same moment Kakashi did, but while the Jonin was forming hand-signs, Luffy stretched two arms forwards, hurtling himself to collide with the threat to his crew.

Shooting past Sanji, the Captain took Arlong's attack straight-on, the jagged nose stabbing through his rubbery shoulder as Luffy dug his feet into the ground.

"L... L... Luffy!" Sanji could barely speak, awed by the captain's decision. Even Kakashi was rendered speechless by the move, of

Luffy throwing himself as a human shield between his nakama and danger.

Luffy merely glared towards his enemy, Arlong, his eyes carrying the promise to send the Fishman 12 feet under.

"Bastard. That was almost the fourth member of my crew hurt because of you. That's something I can never forgive," Brushing aside the pain, Luffy grabbed the collar of Arlong's shirt, before throwing his head backwards several meters.

Gum-gum: Bell!" the resulting head-butt struck like a gong, dislodging Arlong's nose and leaving him dazed from the impact. Luffy stood tall and ready.

"All of your crew are finished. Now, it's my turn to fight. My turn to smash you apart for all that has happened to my crew. My comrades. MY FRIENDS!"

Kakashi couldn't look away. His internal respect for Luffy rising into the realm of reverence. 'He... took that hit for his own crewmate. Without any hesitation or question. And all of this... to him, it's due to his comrades, beings he refuses to abandon...'

"What! Impossib-"

"Gum-gum: Whip!" Luffy launched another strike, his extended leg catching Arlong in his ribs, and launching the Fishman side-ways into a pillar of his own giant house. Still, Arlong rolled with the hit, teared tow sets of teeth from his mouth and charging for LUFFY.

"Take this you rubbery freak! Teeth attack!"

"Gum-gum: Whip!" Luffy launched another strike, his extended leg catching Arlong in his ribs, and launching the Fishman side-ways into a pillar of his own giant house. Still, Arlong rolled with the hit, and rising to his feet, empowered by sheer white-hot rage towards those

that had destroyed his precious crewmates, and begun tearing his plans apart.

"Chew... Kuroobi... Hatchi....you burst right through my door, tear my crew apart... You're dead... Who the hell do you think you are to do this?! Because your death is long overdue!"

Arlong declaring, tearing two sets of teeth from his mouth and charging for Luffy. "Take this you rubbery freak! Teeth attack!" Clamping the jaws in his hands, the arms holding them shot towards the captain, forming a barrage of new attacks. Luffy leapt backwards, dodging each one with a dangerous grin forming on his lips. Arlong's barrage grew more intense, each jaw tearing chunks from the ground where he missed the Straw Hat.

It could not last, however, and Luffy's leg caught one of the fallen Fishmen, stumbling backwards as Arlong's jaws on both his harms, and those in his mouth going for the throat. Luffy powered through the pain, grabbing his head to bend it unnaturally aside before Arlong could pierce his jugular, the bite sending a crack through the façade of the building, including the name written above the doorway.

Still, Luffy was forced to his knees by Arlong's strength. "Heh. Finally, some order amidst this unacceptable chaos. An inferior human on their knees before a Fishman, the proper place in the world." the Fishman captain took the moment to gloat.

"Shut-up Already!" Arlong had only time to glare, as Luffy sent his leg shoot back, to drive it forward into Arlong's groin![1] The sound of crackling egg-shell could be heard by everyone. The Fishman could not even speak at the sledge-hammer rocking his entire being, feeling hollow pinballs clashing about inside of himself from head-to-foot behind the special, terrible agony.

"GHaAAAAAAAAAAAA!" Even Gin, Sanji and Kakashi had to share their sympathies with Arlong, while Luffy just didn't care. Mustering his will past the teeth in his arms, the Captain threw an upper-cut that sent Arlong tumbled head-over heels.

Luffy could only glare, totally unapologetic, as he drew the teeth out of their place. "I'm Monkey D. Luffy. The man who's gonna be King of the Pirates! And you are the one standing between that dream, by making Nami, my navigator, suffer and keeping her here, and trying to kill more of my crewmates!" whipping a trail of blood off his arms.

Slowly, Arlong started to feel his body and balls again, drawing to his knees.

"You....you fucking, indecent, disgusting piece of trash!" Arlong didn't spare Luffy a glance, charging for the wall several meters away and punching a hole through it.

Gin started to blink, 'did that hit from Don Luffy ripple up to his head, makin' him miss on accident?' he questioned. "Huh! WH-WHa-Where is it!? Where is it!?" Arlong was shouting, pressing his hand further into the hole.

"Where in all the hell in the Saw-Blade!"

"Oh, a jagged sword on the wall in that room?"

Everybody turned to Kakashi, who stood aloof, far too innocently, before drawing another scroll from his vest. "This one, by chance?"

Sure enough, following another cloud of smoke, Kakashi stood there hefting a single, massive, black-steel saw-blade over his shoulder.

"I was sneaking in and out of here for the past two days. On one trip out again, I may have stolen this from its place, as it appeared to be the most dangerous weapon inside Arlong Park. Does that happen to be yours?"

Arlong's anger only grew, charging straight for the Jonin. Luffy got there first, throwing two arms out, to wrap themselves under Arlong's armpits and across his head. Next, the Rubber-man twisted his own body around, forming a spring from his waist down.

"Gum-gum: Spring-sling-shot!" Arlong was yanked from his feet, as Luffy's body un-spun itself, building momentum until the end, releasing the load and launching Arlong straight through the wall.

That was not end, as another long-punch connected with the enemy's face, followed by a second to the chest, abs-shoulder-arm-leg-neck-! "Gum-gum: Gatling!" dozens upon dozens of punches bombarded the Fishman, even connecting with his groin, again.

"Captain Luffy!" a new voice came from the door. Everyone turned about, to find Sasuke and Naruto panting outside the doorway to Arlong Park.

"Sasuke, Naruto! What happened to the pair of you after my clone took Zoro away?" Kakashi ordered to pair. Both began to recount what happened with the crew, Sasuke's mood clearly low by the reminder of his hate-inspired blunder.

"After Sasuke used the fire-ball jutsu, then-"

"Teeth-attack!"

"Huh?!" Luffy, distracted by his arriving nakama, had taken his eyes off Arlong. Now, the being's dark mane and savagery produced the moniker of a demon, tearing into Luffy with his teeth again in a blind-rage.

The other Straw Hat's shouted in fear. Gin, Sanji and Naruto, started running towards him, but Kakashi stopped each of them.

"What th' hell, get outa th' way, Kakashi-san!" "We've gotta help Luffy!" "Come-on sensei! Let's beat this guy up!"

"Oh, I think he is quite fine at the moment," Kakashi of the Sharingan remarked, his eye tracing the fight through any dust and rubble, as Sasuke did the same. Soon it began to clear, with a third someone between both captains.

"Wha?! Nazumi!" Sure enough, the corrupt Colonel was held up towards the Fishman, his body littered with scars from Arlong's jaws. Luffy had grabbed the nearest shield he could reach and placed it between himself and the ensuing attack.

"Aaahhh, good thing this guy was here. Those look like they hurt," A certain stretchy Monkey threw the semi-conscious Marine behind him, skipping over to a stop at Kakashi's feet.

"Ar... Arlong... You're... fin-finished... after..."

The Jonin himself could barely resist the temptation to kill the pathetic figure, as before he could say or do anything, more allies reached them.

"Kakashi-sensei!" a familiar voice shouted, calling the ninja's attention towards her.

"Sakura-chan! Nami-san!? Z-ZORO-SAN!" Naruto and Sasuke both could barely contain their emotions, as the swordsman came into sight, held up by Johnny and Yosaku. The rest of the people from Cocoyoshi Village were trailing behind them.

"Nami-swan! Nojiko-schwan! My heart is filled with joy and love to see the pair of you recovered!" Sanji proclaimed, inexplicably weaving towards the pair, his legs swirling like noodles. Closing in towards them, the cook's mind was washed with scenes of the pair throwing themselves into his arms, with physical affection towards his efforts to free them, offering the deepest, most love-filled desires, amidst a shower of rose-petals, and their irresistible assets open for a solid boot in his face.

"Outa-the way Romeo!" The cook found his fantasies met with a kick, lunging him to sail through the air, and crash head-first through a tree. Zoro had gotten in the way, with no patience for the cook's perverted habits: 'This crew can only handle one distraction-prone idiot. Maybe that'll work to knock some sense into the curly-brow

dumbass,' the swordsman's rationale hoped, reaching Kakashi and Gin with Nami, Nojiko, Sakura and Usopp.

"Usopp! You're okay!" Luffy shouted at his friend, deeply relieved to see his fellow link to Shank's crew walking and well. Sasuke had moved over to his idol, but caught himself unsure of what to say to do without surrendering his dignity

"Sakura! Why has everybody followed you here? Did something happen inside the village?"

Kakashi demanded from her, combing through the entire populace beyond them.

"Kakashi-san!" Nami called his attention, stepping in front of the younger girl.

"I requested for us to come here and stand with all of you after Zoro reached the village. A group of 13 members of Arlong's crew did attack to village. But a plan made my Sakura and all of us managed to defeat them. That covered all the members of the Arlong pirates, and is why we're are here now."

Kakashi nodded, but Nami's voice had some dangerous consequences...."NAMI!"

The navigator froze, her own pain and fears gripping her soul at the one voice, from the visage of Arlong rising to his knees.

"You... dared... to betray me! Betray my generosity and mercy towards your home all these years!" Now his rage was at its highest. Arlong fixed Nami, fixed every human present with pure hated.

"This fight, these misfortunes, the horrendous damages to us has all been caused by you! I am not disappointed, I am disgusted with you, for such insubordination! Now, I see leaving your remaining people alive was a mistake, all these years. One that I now mean to correct!"

Turning away from Luffy, Arlong charged straight for Nami's people. The Rubber-man pulled his arms back for another hit, but Arlong could read his moves by now, and the gum-gum bazooka missed him! "Damn it, no!"

Gin and Kakashi began to move, the former throwing his tonfa into Arlong's face, for the iron-ball to shatter against his jagged nose, before a strong arm knocked the other pirate aside. Kakashi began forming hand-signs, stepping forward beyond the others.

"Ice-style: Ice-Prison Jutsu!" Drawing on the technique copied from the Hidden-Snow Village over a decade past, Kakashi executed a Yang-chakra method by manipulating the nearby water to engulf Arlong and lowering the temperature to the freezing point.[2] Quickly the Fishman was frozen-in place, only looking back in shock until his entire body was encased in ice.

Luffy turned around, blinking towards the figure, while many of the audience could only blink at the new decoration.

'Hmmm.....' Kakashi began to reason. 'My lightning must have dissipated from the water by now, after Sanji's enemy Kuroobi absorbed the last of jolts.'

"Chichichichichichichi! Now, nobody move." Turning his eye away from his handiwork, Kakashi saw that Nazumi was still making trouble. The Corrupt Colonel had grabbed two pistols, pointing one at Usopp at the other at Nami.

"Now, assaulting a Marine Colonel is a treasonous crime alone. Particularly in light of conspiring with pirates, harboring stolen valuables, and more-Oooo-ah, ah, ah!" the Marine tauntingly admonished, towards Luffy and Kakashi.

As both started to approach him, Nazumi's hands twitched over his pistols, while Nami and Usopp didn't move a single muscle. Luffy kept walking, unafraid of whether the rat turned his gun on him.

"Now-now you listen to me here! I will not hesitate to-"

"Huh! What is going on, Nyuu?" Glancing forward beyond the stand-off, Hatchan had come out from his room, awakened by the ruckus.

"Nyuu! Wh-what is going on here! Arlong, Kuroobi, everybody! I..I... GGHHHRRRR!" Carshing back inside, the heavily bandaged Octopus grabbed six swords, not his own favorites, and jumped through a window to stand before everyone.

"All of you need to be thrown out of here! Octopus Pot-Sta-!"

"Shut up," a third person leapt to block the six-armed swordsman. Gin's eyes made the bewildered Hatchan screech to a stop. The other pirate began to twirl his single tonfa holding a double-pistol in his other hand by the mussel.

"Man-Demon style: Kishin Ranbu!" Gin charged his new enemy, spinning about with deadly grace, landing in a crouch before rising, to slam the tonfa into his gut, and giving a pistol-whip across Fishman's face. Another set of strikes followed, towards each of Hatchan's arms to force the enemy to drop his swords. Gin did not stop, in full view of the Straw Hats and the frozen Arlong, Hatchan struggled to block or counter as Gin's dexterity ensured no single target was hit twice, making his attacks that much more unpredictable.

Under his strength, Hatchan was beaten until he fell, Gin planting one foot on his back.

"Don, this threat is neutralized," he reported, while Nazumi blinked, recognizing this enemy.

"Hey... you, you're the Man-Demon Gin of-
HAOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWW!"

Sakura smirked from behind him, her right foot sunk into the corrupt rat's groin. Naruto, Sasuke and Kakashi each cringed at the sight,

before the pinkette withdrew her foot, Nazumi dropping his guns and sinking to the floor. Nami could only smirk, drawing her own bo-staff as she knelt before him, pinching one side of his face.

"You... you're the one who tried to steal my treasure. And you shot Usopp and my precious sister Nojiko. These are for them!" Twirling the weapon to build-up force, Nami thrust one end into the Marine's gut, next a swipe at both arms, and a single round-house to his face, launching the Marine across the yard.

He did not escape, as Luffy stuck his left arm out to cloth-line the bastard. Grabbing his collar with the opposite arm, the Straw Hat threw him aside, before curling his left into a fist and launching it to his face. "And this is for hurting my crew! Gum-gum: Rifle!"

The strike shattered Nazumi's jaw and nose to pieces, then launching him skywards into the horizon. Luffy still was not done yet, turning around, he threw both arms backwards, "Everyone, get out the way! Because I still need to finish with Arlong!"

A scramble followed, the entire crew and civilians moving outside of Arlong park, as Luffy's fresh bazooka honed-in on the frozen Fishman. The strike shattered the ice, launching him through a window in the building, with Luffy jumping after him.

"Huh?" the room Luffy was in was piled high with papers, maps, shelves and a writing desk. Some fresh projects every hung from the wall, a few torn to pieces beneath Arlong's form or shards of ice that followed him. Thousands of them must have been inside as the Straw hat captain eyed each one in wonder. Until his eyes found something else. Extending one arm, he grabbed a pen from the desk and a single drawing of a person that had been torn in half.

"Ghhh! MY-my charts, NO!" Arlong's voice was heard, as the Fishman drew up to his knees.

"Hey, what is this room?" Luffy questioned him, unflinching as the Shark's blood-shot eyes met his own.

"Why this is Nami's room, of course. The place where I make her draw all her marvelous sea-charts and land maps. This is her desk, her masterpieces, her pens and records. Everything she has built up for me across the past 8 years."

Luffy stopped moving looking on in innocent curiosity as Arlong continued. Yet the more his enemy spoke, the narrower Luffy's world grew, until only this room and the hateful being in front of him were left.

"She's brilliant. Far too good for such talents to be wasted on human trash like you."

"You only wish to steal her contributions potential away from me, from the Arlong Empire! That girl is the key to fulfilling my own dreams and ambitions, and such garbage like you will never take her!"

"Is that so?" Luffy asked, holding the damaged picture up before Arlong. "Then, who is this?"

"Oh, that's just to woman who raised her. Bellemere, her name was. I freed Nami from the confines of her own existence after killing that woman years ago. I still can't understand why Nami would waste time keeping that piece of crap or drawing it in the first place. It's useless to recall or remember such pathetic, stupid beings like she was, after dying by confessing she had two daughters instead of lying and hiding to ensure her own survival."

"If that woman had remained alive, without the means to realize Nami's potential and talent as I have, that girls life would be far worse that it is now," Arlong continued, ignorant of the growing rage he invoked within Luffy, who only looked at the blood-stained pen in his hand.

"Under my watchful eyes, I ensured Nami worked days and nights away, right here in this room. After this fiasco, though, she will never leave this place again until it in finished, and I will have all that I need

to conquer and subjugate the world, through the knowledge transferred into these sea-charts. I will provide all that she needs."

"No one else can use her like me! She would be totally wasted on beings like you!" Arlong finished, bracing himself for another attack. His fish driving towards Luffy's face-until it was caught in the Monkey D.'s hand and held in-place.

'What the... my..hand. Why can't I move it?'

"Use her!?" Luffy repeated himself, curling his hand to nearly break the bones in Arlong's fist. Carefully, he pocketed the drawing and threw away the pen.

Arlong tried to pull away, until Luffy threw a savage hook, shattering every tooth in his mouth.

"What do you take her for, you fishy piece of trash!"

Arlong stumbled back, trying to regain himself, until his dreams began shattering before his eyes. Luffy threw one leg into a pile of charts scattering them through the air or out a fresh hole in wall. Arlong let a loud exclamation, trying to save them, but Luffy only took the opening to smash the book-case on the wall. Move and move, the Captain was tearing the place apart, until Arlong stopped try to save his possession, and turned on Luffy again.

"What do you think you are doing!?" Luffy ignored him, tearing apart every inch of the roomher could see, avoiding Arlong's helpless efforts to stop him.

Outside, many people looked up in wonder, especially the ninjas.

"Hey, Kakashi-sensei? What are all those strange papers?" Naruto asked his teacher.

"Shouldn't Captian Luffy have thrown Arlong out of the room, or into a different part of the building yet?" Sasuke demanded.

"What's going on?" Usopp cried out, "why is all of that stuff falling out of there?"

"Should one of us go up there and help him?" Sakura questioned.
"What do you think, Miss Nami?"

The navigator did not respond, her eyes recognizing where Arlong had been thrown into. To her, it appeared everything flying through the window fell slower than a moment, shattering to pieces or landing in the water and ruin.

Her bo clattered to the ground, Nami herself feeling the unseen shackles placed by Arlong to that room starting to crack. Sweat was pouring from her face as her heart was racing with a relief she had been denied for half her life. Finally, a work-desk was kicked through at wall, immediately followed by thousands of maps scattering through the air. She followed them all the ground, recalling Arlong's instructions, his demands, his torments, and hundreds of nights staining the labours with her own blood, aching for Nojiko and Bellemere, again.

"Dumb brat" the memory came, of Arlong pinning her down painfully against the desk. "You can't trick me that easily, trying to draw a fake chart," knocking her aside painfully and tearing up a picture she drew of Bellemere. Piling the hopeless, helpless, and escapeless sense greater with every second she spent there.

Now, the source of her pain and enslavement shattered on the ground, the work made at it falling about, torn, cut, or falling to the water, beyond salvation. The shackles of bondage, guilt and suffering were breaking with them. Layers of pain and misery were scattering to the wind, letting her true self and true feelings surpass them all. Shining brighter with every move Luffy made to destroy the nightmare she had been imprisoned by.

One hand rose to her mouth, tears of relief, stifled for years, finally coming free. Her opposite hand grasped the hat sitting on her brow, Luffy's promise echoing in her ears.

"Th..thank you," came from her, the most emotional words she had spoken in her life.

Suddenly, Arlong was thrown out from the room, and Luffy stood proud in the crevasse in the wall, battered, bloodied, and growing stronger by the second. "ARLONG! You keep talking about how important these sea-charts and map are. And about how much better Fishmen are! I don't understand any of it! But I finally know how to save Nami!"

Leaping from the building, Luffy landed on the ground as Arlong rose to his feet. Charging him, Luffy grabbed the Fishman by the nose, ignoring the tears in his figures by mustering his strength to bend it in half.

Arlong's pain was the loudest noise to come that day, at his proud, powerful nose, the trademark of his flag, bent and broken under Luffy's strength.

"I'm setting Nami free! That room! It isn't anything more than her jail cell. The place that's holding her back and only seen pain and suffering!" Turning aside, Luffy threw one leg to the sky, extending to twice the height of Arlong Park. "I've gotta break the whole place apart! Gum-Gum: Battle-Ax!"

Before Arlong could move, the leg descend, gathering speed until it cut through the room Nami's spirit had been trapped within. It did not stop there, smashing through every layer of Arlong Park, with enough force to produce the force of an explosion on the bottom-floor.

Everyone braced themselves from the rubble, Kakashi weaving hand-signs: "Earth style: Mud wall!" a barrier, engraved with Dog-faces covered them, sheltering the ground from dust and falling debris. Nami, Naruto and Usopp cried out in worry for Luffy, running around and directly under falling wreckage above their heads.

"Nami-swan! Naruto!" Sanji was back on his feet, running forward to kick all the falling pieces aside with his legs. The three were unhurt as the wreckage settled. Kakashi lowered the wall, to the sight of Luffy glaring at the remains of the building he had shattered to pieces.

"Luffy!" Sanji exclaimed. "That stunt almost hurt Nami-swan, Usopp and Naruto! What the hell were you thinking, doing that while we were in the danger-zone!"

"Hhhh? Oh. Hahahahahahahaha! Sorry guys, my bad," the boy apologized, joyfully. Kakashi groaned, reminded of a certain "eternal-rival" he knew of with a similar habit. Naruto gaped at his captain, while Zoro smacked his own forehead embarrassed. Sasuke's eye was twitching, and Sakura was leaning over at Usopp.

"Is that guy bi-polar, or something Usopp-san?" The bandaged sniper pondered the question, then answered, "that might be a good question, Sakura-chan. I don't honestly know, but it might explain a lot about Luffy."

"Nami!" Arlong was still alive and fixing the Navigator with the eyes of a broke man. Luffy began to move and his stubborn enemy staggered to his feet.

"If I... can't....have you... then nobody can!" he declared, "Shark Tooth Drill!" forming a rotating twister towards her. Nami stumbled back, while Naruto ran in front of her, forming clones to block the charging enemy. Kakashi was ready to move, but Luffy got their first.

"Gum-gum: whirling Battle-ax!" Throwing his entire body forwards in a somersault, Luffy's leg swept through the air to land across Arlong's form at a low-altitude. The Fishman's back was pinned to the ground, Luffy's heel striking his head, and stopping him inches from Naruto or Nami. Punishing off his other leg, Luffy landed on top of Arlong, standing on top of him, with eyes focused entire on one, single task.

Grabbing his collar, Luffy hauled the Fishman to eye-level. "I....will.....never....let....you.....HARM....NAMI... IN....ANY WAY AGAIN! SHE IS SOMEBODY THAT I CARE ABOUT AND WILL ALWAYS BE MY NAKAMA!" Nami could only tremble at Luffy's words, watching his head shoot backwards several dozen meters.

"GIN, Throw me your weapon!" he ordered the man. The pirate obeyed, tossing his tonfa at Luffy's face. His head shooting for Arlong, Luffy caught the tonfa in his teeth, "Gum-gum: LOADED CANNON-BELL!"

Timing it so the moment before he could hit Arlong, Luffy's head turned aside, driving the iron-ball straight into Arlong's face. The impact was worse than sickening, shattering all the cartilage in the shark's jagged nose, dislocating his jaw, and sending the Fishman spinning like a top, until the momentum ended, and the last part of the Arlong pirates collapsed....in....utter... defeat.

For a moment, nobody moved. Luffy himself spat the tonfa into his hand. Until someone grabbed his shoulders, turning him around to face her. Nami stood before him, almost unable to speak.

Turning around to see everyone present, Nami saw everyone cared for were alive and alright. Nobody had been lost, Arlong was more than beaten, and the place that had been a source of imperialism and dread lay in ruins.

"Nami? Why are you crying now?" Luffy asked, raising his opposite hand to brush the tears from her eyes. More continued to follow, Nami's mind unable to think clearly past the awe of how and what had passed. She rushed to wrap him in her arms, hugging him tight and crying into his shoulder, in happiness, thankfulness and pure, truthful joy.

Around her, more cries of celebration rose. Men kissed their wives and loved ones, children cheered for their knew hero, Genzo hugged Nojiko close, Kakashi grinned at their handiwork, Johnny and Yosaku

were jumping with glee, while Zoro, Gin and Sanji grinned in their success and satisfaction.

Naruto was the loudest of all, celebrating their victory, while Sakura rested one arm on a wall trying to feel the tension drain from her, and Sasuke was smirking in pride. Kakashi strode up to his kunoichi genin, steer her to stand beside the other two, and his other hand to quiet Naruto for a moment.

"Huh? What is Kakashi-sensei? Should we celebrating with them, ya know?"

"Each of you three. You performed spectacularly today. As your teacher, and a Jonin of our village. I am deeply and sincerely proud of you all," Kakashi praised them, his words simply, but more than enough. Together, Team 7 felt a deep rush of successful pride; the same yet stronger as that from the Bell-test, far stronger.

"Well done."

And there stood the Straw Hat Pirates, fall and proud, amidst their first, landmark, victory.

End.

Phew.....This has been officially the longest chapter I have ever written. The long-wait for this was due to a single presentation of my Master of Art's research thesis that was given to the entire University Department I am part of, finishing that same thesis, along with both written and marking different final exams, and preparing to fly half-way across the country.

I had a lot on my plate, and a very hard time actually finding the calm to write more without my job nagging in my head.

On top of that, I wanted to ensure this chapter did a lot of things, including step-up the action in the story as some reviews have been requesting more. While keeping the

characterization very strong, and making sure the powerful, wily and dangerous Hatake Kakashi did not simply become inspired to one-shot all the Arlong Pirates himself.

I also wanted to give each crewmate their time to shine, and give a taste of how they will function in future Arcs.

It is one of the chapters I now have the most pride to have written.

[1] -Luffy is the same man who kicked Buggy the Clone downstairs just at the opportunity. Why the heck should that not happen to Arlong?

[2] -Naruto, Ninja clash in the land of snow. In Naruto, Yin techniques involve creating form or images from pure chakra, while Yang techniques involve empowering existing matter with chakra to alter its properties. Relating to elemental jutsu, this would include any methods that produce the element directly from someone's chakra, fire-style, lightning-style, the majority of elemental kekkei-genkai and some wind-style. While, most often, water-style and earth-style techniques function by pouring chakra into those elements that exist within a character's vicinity, save for rare cases like Kage-class shinobi skills (Kisame, Kakashi, Niidaime Hokage, Niidaime Mizukage, or Akatsuchi). From Ninja Clash in the Land of Snow, I believe that the ice-style that Kakashi was able to use falls under Yang-style, different from Haku who could create ice directly from their chakra in any situation.

This is my favourite Naruto movie, so it is definitely going to be making an appearance here. And the potential for its use in this story is just too much fun to leave out.

Celebrates, Reflections

Growth Through Chaos: chapter 15. Celebrates, Reflections and the past.

Important: Read all the way to the end, to find a fresh voting poll. Everyone who remembers my "Who should fight Arlong" contest? Another one is starting at the end of this chapter. Read the reading, and ONLY vote through a PM or a Review.

Announcement: some reviewers have made some strong opinions over the relationships I decided on for this story, particularly towards Luffy/Nami. First, I do not plan to simply shove relationships into the open. Each one will develop over time; hence Nami and Luffy not becoming a couple at the end of the last chapter with Arlong's defeat.

Some other relationships in this story will form between the characters, but not go into home-runs. Some relationships in people's lives can form and still separate over a natural course instead of culminating in marriage. I do not want to lose readers over certain relationships in this story, but that does not mean some will be followed strictly by demand, complaints or suggestions. For one example, I will admit to be a Naruto/Hinata fan. Yet, I have plans for Naruto and Sakura to become a couple in this story, but they will not marry each other and eventually part naturally. I do not want to lose readers over the relationships added to this story either.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece.

Thank you to my Beta Reader, Leaf Ranger.

Please Read, Review, and Vote!

Sunlight cast over the Conomi Islands; bathing the fresh ruins of Arlong Park in a spotlight for everyone to see, to know, and to feel to be true.

Everyone was celebrating, all the while heaping their gratitude and praise on the Straw Hats. Some were throwing Luffy high in the air, led by Genzo and Dr. Nako. Nojiko, Nami and Sakura stood together arm in arm, Gin, Sanji and Kakashi stood by with shared looks of satisfaction, and Sasuke let a smile of pride cover his face.

Yosaku and Johnny were dancing arm-in-arm. Naruto quickly became the most jubilant, jumping around, throwing peace signs with both hands and celebrating the loudest of all.

"Yeah, we won! Waa-Hoooo! Our first big, bad-guy, beat down, Believe it! All those bad fishmen are finished, Yeah-hahaha! Wooooo! Yeah, all of us! We did it!" he cried, and an arm looped around his waist.

"SHishishishishishi! Yup, we did Naruto!" Luffy exclaimed, yanking the blonde up beside him. A choice that led everyone to scramble, catching Naruto in time as Luffy hit the ground with a solid thud.

Most of the people blinked, before surrounding Luffy to offer their apologies. Meanwhile, his remaining crewmates only shook their heads, while Kakashi took stock of a new problem.

The Jonin pulled Genzo, Nojiko, Johnny, and Yosaku aside.

"Wha's up, Big-bro Kakashi? Those guys are beaten, shouldn't we join in with everyone else?" Yosaku asked.

"Oh, only one minor dilemma," he calmly reassured. Kakashi's hand rose, gesturing to all the beaten Arlong Pirates surrounding the yard. "What are we to do with all of them? Captain Luffy did send that crooked Marine flying. But the rest aren't going to stay blacked out

forever, and neither will those in the forest that Naruto and Sasuke defeated. Nor the squad that Sakura, Nami, Usopp and the pair of you fought inside the village. If they're left here and get the chance to rally, how soon can another fight erupt and endanger everybody?"

The Jonin's perspective brought things to a head, sobering up everyone within a moment.

"Believe me," Kakashi sighed, running one hand through his wild hair. "After all that, I'd like nothing more than to step back and relax. But we still have a situation on hand. Everyone under Arlong or Nezumi's command needs to be found and secured somewhere."

"Hmmm, you've gotta a strong point there, Mr. Kakashi." Genzo nodded. "I don't have anywhere near the room for even 10 of these monsters, let alone a whole crew of them. And the only spot to think of that could have enough cells was just split in half by Straw-hat."

The village leader continued pondering the problem, while Kakashi had already decided on a solution "Well. This Arlong did have a partnership with a Marine captain, whom we met earlier today. That repulsive, little man must have arrived here somehow. And I doubt any complaints should we misappropriate his ship will come about."

These ideas were spread throughout the group, coaxing everyone to settle down and join the well-needed organizing. Half of the people were milling about the wreckage of the fortress, raiding anything they could find: treasure, clothing, keepsakes, weapons, and enough food and alcohol for an army of hundreds. Naruto's shadow clones were helping everywhere, with a list of specific orders from Zoro, Nami, Usopp and Kakashi. Luffy, Nami, Sakura and Usopp went with the others back to the village, while Sasuke was ordered to lead Gin, Sanji and another army of Naruto's to where Zoro's escorts had been beaten.

After each and every corrupt Marine and Fishman were accounted for, Kakashi found Nezumi's ship further out in the way. Moving it closer to the coast took some doing, but after finishing the job

everyone was locked inside the cells; all save for the captains themselves.

Kakashi made sure to lock Arlong in a private cell, chained, beaten and bloodied.

For the next stage, Yosaku and Johnny found a den-den-mushi inside Nezumi's office, giving Genzo a new idea. The man's only contact through one had always been monitored by Arlong in person, but now he could message some additional Marines to transport their prisoners away. Johnny and Yosaku gave their own input, telling the officer the most renowned, dependable and successful Marine in all the East Blue.

"Are you serious!?" the snail bellowed, with two cigars in its mouth and a head of white hair.

"If there's any chance you're screwing around with me, then a problem bigger for you to handle will blow your front door apart! At best your claims mean corruption, treason and a Marine officer who ignored their duty and let a criminal run amuck! At worst it means the outright failure and betrayal of one of our own towards the murders of fellow Marines and a highly organized pirate nearly launching a crusade across this ocean! If you're shitting me, I'm gonna hound you whenever you want to run, then you to Impel Down myself!"

"It is the truth, sir," Genzo answered into the phone, his composure strengthened by the present relief of finally... at long last... giving Bellemere's murder its incriminating report.

"My name is Genzo, by the way. If you feel that this is a lie, come on over the Conomi Islands and see it yourself. But Saw-Tooth Arlong has been keeping over 20 villages here under his thumb for eight years now. Bribing local Marines to stay hidden all the while. It all started 8 years ago when he murdered another Marine, Bellemere, when she was protecting her daughters. A single pirate crew, under the captainship of a Monkey D. Luffy, showed up today with a grudge against Arlong. The Fishmen were all defeated and so were the

Marines collaborating with them. The pirates wreaked their fortress and left with some of the treasure kept by the Arlong Pirates behind, but the rest and everyone they defeated is still here."

Next, the scarred official lifted a book Kakashi happened to find elsewhere in the office, holding the den-den mushi's mouthpiece in a steady hand.

"I have a logbook kept by Colonel Nezumi open here, recording a list of all the dealings between Branch 16 and Arlong open in front of me. If you-"

"Can it!" The voice across the snail came in a snarl. "Give me the officer code and labels of that logbook right this minute!"

A handful of minutes later, Genzo read out the information from Nezumi's logbook, while Kakashi stood aside with the bounty hunters. With every piece of information recited by Genzo, another cigar appeared in the snail's mouth, leaving the air heavy with smoke. For several minutes no one made a sound....

Until-

"I'll make my way to your island with a crew of men to get the bastards within the hour. And keep that logbook somewhere secure."

With a final click, the transponder-snail went to sleep. Genzo stood up, facing Johnny and Yosaku.

"Are the pair of you sure about this Marine? After most of the ones I've met, expecting another to actually solve this problem looks almost like stupidity."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," Johnny spoke up. "They call'em the 'White Hunter' for a reason. Every single pirate that encountered this guy has been totally flattened. He's the most dependable one around."

"At least Big Bro Luffy can still get the credit for this one," Yosaku took over. "Big bro Kakashi? Are you sure you don't wanna take the credit and the bounty purse for all these guys?"

The Jonin shook his head, reasoning that more attention towards himself and his ninja would be a gamble at best. "Ninjas are meant to remain unseen and obscure by our nature. The less other people know about us, the better. Besides, running around with a pirate crew here, even one like Captain Luffy, will be difficult enough on its own."

"Now, Johnny, Yosaku," he commanded the pair. "Given how you've shown some awareness towards these Marines, Arlong, and Hawkeyes. I have some questions about him, and others that are across the world."

News of Arlong's defeat spread throughout the entirety of the Conomi Islands, each and every person felt rays of light shattering their near-enslavement and the looming onset of death.

Those in Cocoyoshi Village, where Arlong's tyranny had begun, were elevated far higher than the others. None forgot all that had been lost over the past eight years, nor the guilt they carried over Nami's efforts to save, but remembrance did not prevent the mood of celebrations.

Well, most of them. Zoro and Luffy had been dragged to the clinic by Nami and Dr. Nako.

"Come on, I can smell the meat outside! I just need MEAT!"

"Luffy! Just stay down for a while more." Nami admonished her captain. Luffy ignored it, his legs shooting up to run for the outside. Before two elongated arms reached their limits he was caught on a taunt. Shooting backwards, the rubber man landed on the bed, with Nami still trying to hold down one arm and Sakura gripping the other.

"For crying out loud," rang the gravelly tone of Dr. Nako, "do you not grasp how bad these can be, even after I stitched you up yesterday, boy? Fighting around here reopened he wounds. Pirates are supposed to be smarter than that! Don't you have a ship's doctor at all?"

"Doctor?" the Straw Hat's voice and eye lit up. "I never thought of one of those! Sounds like a good idea. But first, we need a musician!"

"L-Luffy!" Zoro groaned from two beds away. "Why do you want a musician more than a doctor?"

"Because Pirates love to sing and eat, Zoro. We have Sanji as a cook now, so all that's left is a musician. They're way more fun than sitting here, in a bed." Luffy reasoned.

"That's true," the swordsman's raspy voice called over to the captain. "I have... to agree with... you on that one."

Sakura glared between them both, trying and failing to follow their logic in any constructive manner. "Don't bother," Nami advised her, with one hand covering her face. "Trying to give common priorities to either of these two is like talking to a wall. Still, at least Luffy has it where it counts," she acknowledged.

"Hey!-ow!" Zoro shouted, then continued groaning at his wounds. None of that made it easier to keep Luffy in one place for Dr. Nako to fix the stab wounds Arlong delivered to him. Making matters all the worse was how once he did finish up, Nami and Luffy bolted from the clinic, leaving Sakura and Dr. Nako to handle Zoro alone.

"You dumb-ass! Like I told you one day ago, this kind of injury won't just heal on its own! I'm not even at that monster one that reopened on your chest, yet. How the hell you're still alive after Arlong stabbed ya and the all other's wounds from the Marines is somethin' I might never comprehend!" Dr. Nako declared, while Sakura stood beside

him holding a tray with various instruments. Usopp chuckled at the sound from three beds away.

It was another hour before Zoro was finished and demanding somebody bring him a drink of sake. The Doctor nearly broke his own medical oath and hammered the swordsman over the head; 'Somebody that cavalier and carefree is too much for anyone to handle!'

Zoro simply pushed him aside, stumbling out into the late afternoon, and finding the real party in full swing.

"Yeah!" "Woo-hoo-hoo-hoo! We're Free!" "The Fishmen are gone! It's over, now time to celebrate!"

Cries of joy were lifting everyone higher and higher by the minute. Tables were lining the streets and squares of the Cocoyoshi Village, piled with food, beer, wine, fruit and more. Others were cheering, dancing, or heaping food towards the Straw hats surrounding them.

Kakashi's group had returned, with the others scattering about while he stood back, heading for another job. Slipping into Genzo's house, the Jonin brought out a single scroll from his flack vest. 'Hmmm. On second thought,' Kakashi silently deliberated, 'This should be safer in its original hiding place, where those on their way to arrest Arlong and his followers won't be looking for it.'

Packing the treasure scroll tightly away, Kakashi moved back outside, where he found people on the rooftops singing of freedom, and joy. dreams and desires to the heavens. "Hey, whaddya just standing there for, man!" someone cried, pointing straight towards Kakashi.

"Yeah! Come on Old Man Kakashi! Grab some meat and join the party! We've got to celebrate this big win for our crew!" Luffy exclaimed, using one hand to yank Kakashi straight into the festivities. The Jonin couldn't slip away without hurting someone,

leaving him stuck as the centre of attention from all the grateful people. To Kakashi's complete chagrin.

Sasuke stayed apart from the others, waiting for Zoro outside the clinic. Once his idol came stumbling out, the Uchiha's ninja wire-tied him to the wall before he strolled forward to get a mug of booze for the man.

"Hey, Brat! Get these things off of me! There's a mug of booze call me!" the swordsman was complaining loudly.

"After you got lost and stuck in another fight today?" Sasuke coolly deadpanned "I talked with Captain Luffy and heard about your terrible direction inhibition. Just stay right there, and don't wonder anywhere, Zoro-san," Sasuke trolled him.

Yet as the last Uchiha was moving through the less rowdy crowds of the party, people began to approach him. "Excuse me?"

"Hm?" Sasuke found a small girl standing before him. With another woman close by, unmistakably her mother.

"Thank you," the child spoke. "Arlong took my Daddy away, and I almost lost Mommy too. I never thought he would leave, but you made my dreams come true," the girl expressed to him, with eyes filled with worship and relief. Reaching out, she grasped Sasuke's hand pulling herself closer to hug his arm, leaving the Uchiha too stunned to pull away. "Thank you, so very, very much!" the girl professed, her voice high yet quiet.

The mother pried them apart slowly, before falling to her knees before Sasuke, head bowing deep.

"Thank you. For our freedom that all the hatred those Fishman carried towards us."

The pair moved on, leaving Sasuke stupefied. His mind fell into a blur of confusion and even stranger feelings. Moving through the

crowd only on reflex, more and more gratitude and praise were given to him everywhere. Making Sasuke all the more confused at these new sensations; 'All these people... their praise doesn't have any pity like others do. It all feels... real,' the survivor realized. 'They're impressed by me, for my own accomplishments. Not my name, not my brother or anything else.'

He was not the only person somewhat out of place. Gin had been lost before Luffy, Johnny and Yosaku roped him into a drinking contest. One that Zoro demanded to join after the bounty hunters tied him loose.

Sanji had three different women under his arms and could not be more perverted-errr-happy! He was the happiest man on the island!

Sakura tried dragging him away but gradually gave up. Before finding herself dancing with another boy from the island, wearing a toque and happy as could be. Moving around with everybody else she became too wrapped up in the joyful atmosphere to do anything else.

'Maybe.... this new world and all the people... it isn't so bad at all!' the pinkette decided.

Elsewhere, Naruto was running around with young children. After filling his stomach with their food, the orphan had been bombarded with praise from the people they had saved. Yet, instead of glee or fulfilment, only a heavy, hurtful, weight began forming in his chest. All the smiles, all the joy, led the uncomfortable ache to grow more, and more, and more.

Quickly, Naruto fled from the villagers before it all became too much. Only to find several younger children swarming him. Each of the kids was aged 8 or younger, trapped by knowing only Arlong's rule. With it finally over, they were playing freely in the streets for the first time in their lives, carefree, safe, and abounding with joy.

"Come on, Big Brother Naruto, come and catch me!" one of them cried, laughing as Naruto began chasing her in a game of tag.

"Oooohh-Big mistake, Mimi! I'm gonna getcha, ya know!" Naruto replied, running in circles with the group; thrilled at the chance to enjoy a child's game with others, another the first in his entire lifetime.

"Mimi! Stan! It's getting late! What are you doing with that boy!"

Naruto froze, a terrified deer caught in headlights. Some of the parents had come over to the commotion and were eying him and the others. Looking across them with his mind blank, Naruto blinked as each of the adults-only smiled before walking up to him.

"Young man? Thank you for helping us on Nami's behalf," a woman smiled down, patting Naruto over his head. "I even heard you were the one who defeated Chew," another parent praised him, placing one hand on Naruto's shoulder.

"Thank you barely seems enough, for what you've done for us, son."

"Yeah, come on and join Big Brother Naruto and us!" Mimi cried, pulling the adults to join in the fun. They did... for a while. Until somebody noticed the hero of the moment was missing. The others started calling around for Naruto, but he'd disappeared into nowhere.

Across the island, once night began to fall, Nami slipped away from the celebrations. Walking along the beach, the girl smiled as her destination came into sight. Minutes later she was sitting on the ground, talking to someone.

"I... I should've told you this first. But I had to help a few friends. Everything... it doesn't feel real, Bellemere, but Arlong real is beaten for good."

Raising her head, Nami smiled towards the grave, where the only mother she'd known was resting, peaceful and grateful for the first

time.

"You remember those people I talked about this morning? They give me a headache half the time, but all the rest, they really are incredible. I met them by accident, and don't know much about the two new ones. But..." Nami's descriptions came to a pause, trying to think of Kakashi, Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura and place her feelings towards them.

"One of them saved my treasure from being stolen and is the only one to look before they leap. Another two younger ones are quite adorable, almost like a little brother and sister. But the fourth one carries some kind of pain, I just know it, and seems to be angry about everything."

"But I owe them a lot right now. They did the impossible today, and everyone is safe. They set me free, Bellemere. Especially the captain, Luf..." Nami's voice trailed off again, recalling every emotion Luffy had given to her: comfort, freedom, relief, protection, and so many more.

"Thought I'd find you here."

Turning to face the voice that cut into her thoughts, Nami found Genzo standing at her shoulder, with Kakashi and Sasuke behind them. The ninjas were at a respectful distance, as Genzo laid a hand on Nami's shoulder.

"She'd be proud of you Nami. More so than anyone else," he murmured. "Not only for all that you've done, but for the woman you have grown into. And the people standing by your side."

Smiling up at him, Nami agreed.

"Hey, Genzo."

"Hmm?"

"If she were still alive, and I said I wanted to become a pirate. Think Bellemere would let me do it?" Nami asked, to Genzo's surprise. The man shouted at how it would never happen, until he suddenly stopped, beginning to laugh.

"Guhahaha! You know I'm telling you the truth. But that wouldn't matter, would it? Because you'd do it anyways, no matter what anyone said," he resigned.

Nami's chuckles were musical, "That's right, nope."

"Does that mean you're back as a navigator for us?" Sasuke interjected. Turning back to face him, Nami began to shudder, recalling the wounds he had given her, in that exact spot, only hours earlier.

"I have something to ask you," the Uchiha continued, even more tactless than his teammate. "Arlong murdered your mother. He made you suffer in the worst ways possible. Even your sister..." Taking a moment to swallow back his building emotions, Sasuke's sole, entire focus surrounded Nami.

"... Nojiko said that both of you suffered for revenge. But Captain Luffy was the one who defeated Arlong, and none of you even defeated a single member of his crew. What does that mean to you, losing that revenge!?"

Locking eyes with Nami, two sharingans lit up the night, each carrying two tomoe, this time. "How do you think and feel about that? Of someone else defeating Arlong, or how he is still alive, right now? Don't you want to destroy him, by your own hands for what he's done?!" Sasuke demanded.

Seeing his eyes for the first time left Genzo speechless. While Nami thought back on her past:

Of a tiny, scarred, angry girl, her voice awash with tears: *"I don't want anyone to see this. Hh-hhh-this... -hh-this... awful tattoo. I'm*

just pretending, but it's like he owns me now-hhh-hhhh." Darker silhouettes of Arlong, his men, and so much more followed. She recalled the helplessness behind it, along with regret from every completed map, every finished project, she made for him, and the success those results brought for Arlong. Betrayal, helplessness, and the fear for the survival of all she cared for dominated Nami's thoughts.

Some better memories did join them, however.

"Nojiko? What is that?"

"Oh, you mean this? It's nothing. Just a tattoo. Now I look just like you." And the sliver of laughter shared between sisters, the first they'd had for years. Satisfaction followed; drawn from every step she took towards the goal of 100,000,000. And finally, on that crucial day, she met Luffy.

At the darkest point in her life, when even Nojiko couldn't do anything to her suffering, Luffy was the one to bring an end to the nightmare. He took her burden with the strength to make it weightless and fulfilled it without a second's hesitation.

Looking over at Sasuke, Nami felt another rush of awe at the image of Luffy putting himself between her and Arlong, before giving the fishman his final defeat.

Turning around to face her mother's grave, Nami gave Sasuke her answer:

"I hate Arlong down to my bones, Sasuke-san. And no matter what comes into my life, I can't get back what he stole away. I'm going to remember what happened until the day that I die."

"But... at the same time... now that he's defeated, I'm free of any ties to him as well. For the first time, I can live for myself and my own dreams, not for his or out of fear of what he might do, again. Just knowing that Arlong is beaten, for good. That is enough for me. Now

I can live my own life, without letting him dictate what I do. I'm content with that."

Turning around, Nami found Sasuke's eyes wide in shock, Genzo smiling with pride, and Kakashi's one eye fixed on his student. When nobody made a sound for several minutes, the Copy-nin stepped between them.

"The Captain is looking for you, Nami. He wants everyone together to introduce our new members more officially and decide on where we go from here. Sasuke, why don't you join Nami to meet him. I'll be there soon."

The girl smiled, walking forward to grab the stunned Uchiha by his hand. Caught in a daze, Sasuke did nothing as Nami walked him back towards her village, with Genzo beside her.

Kakashi's gaze followed each of them until a bend in the path obscured his sight. Alone for a time, the Jonin-sensei looked back across the cliff, towards the ruins of Arlong Park, then out towards the sea, again.

'I can't believe Naruto actually used 1,000 years of death on one of them. And Sasuke even confirmed it,' a single hand slapping his forehead at the image both students had described.

'When I asked them to recount how their fight with those Marines and other fishmen went... well, at least it explains that shout across the island about somebody's butt.'

'But all of that is beside the point.' Kakashi's thoughts grew very serious, thinking back across everything from Krieg's appearance to Arlong's defeat. Of Naruto becoming poisoned, which he still hadn't shaken off completely; to their encounter with the Sea Cow, whom Nami identified as Momoo; finding Usopp and Nojiko wounded and Sakura around them, and Mihawk's duel with Zoro.

'Before one week ago, Minato-sensei was the only person I've seen who carried that kind of power and skill. After talking with Johnny and Yosaku about the Warlords, and their mandate to stay undefeated to maintain such status...'

'I have been too inactive; this world, or... wherever we are. The past two days have shown more threats and dangers than anything I faced in the 3rd Shinobi War. Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura were endangered far too much, I even thought the two boys could free Zoro without any problems, or the men they faced with Arlong and Krieg would be no higher than C-class threats. But Naruto nearly died, twice, Sasuke made an inexcusable blunder, and Sakura had to be saved by Usopp.'

The man dropped his knees in front of the grave, his hands curling into fists, clenching handfuls of dirt in a deadly vice. 'My Genin were hurt and endangered. And I wasn't there to aid them until it had ended. They barely avoided death, some by seconds or inches.'

The Jonin raised his head, looking out across the ocean-bound horizon.

'There is no village here for us to contact, or retreat to. Chef Zeff was right. All those weeks at the restaurant, why didn't I place emphasis on training with my students? After just assuming moderate growth was enough, I could handle any other threats? Or take focus any excess form of danger on to myself, and leave each of them out of harm's way?'

Thinking back over all that happened, Kakashi's shoulders buckled under the load of his self-admonishment. At the Konoha memorial stone, where he would envision the past, and different scenarios where those he cared about would have lived if he had only made certain choices in time. There, standing before Bellemere's grave, a different kind of mindset gripped Kakashi's consciousness; imagining dozens of cases where he failed, and each of his students would die, or meet a worse fate.

'No more. I need to prepare them much more intensively, I know that, now. This world has who knows how many dangers in it, from Warlords to those Sea Kings, and more. And the only person who can teach Naruto, Sakura or Sasuke any kind of ninja arts to survive it...'

"That weight is on my shoulders now," Kakashi spoke, aloud. "It's not just about being the only one who can teach Sasuke about his sharingan. That same responsibility applies to each of my students. All of us need to grow far, far more skilled than we are right now. And fast."

"I told you I'll never let my friend die... that is something I keep trying to convince myself of. There are so many people I was unable to protect so far," Kakashi spoke to himself, reflecting on so many people he looked at only from the present.

"Every time I swear that I'll protect them... still find myself facing the truth of when I'm not able to do it."

Even as those words were spoken, spectres of Sasuke, Sakura and Naruto each stood out from others he carried in his heart, from a different place; the present and the future, surrounded by threats of how each one could die if Kakashi did nothing to prepare them.

Rising back to his feet, anyone around would see the Jonin-sensei's right eye blazing red as a new pledge was made.

"I can't stop danger from coming to them. Now I see that. So, I will do the one thing I can guarantee: make sure they are prepared to face any and every threat we will find!"

Only time could tell if Kakashi lived to that promise, or failed his own ninja way, again.

Four hours later, a light was bright inside Nojiko's house in the dark of night. The entire Straw-Hat Crew were inside, with Luffy

sitting on the table.

"Ok. Now that Arlong's beaten, it's time to meet our new crew member. Nami, Zoro, this is Gin, and Sanji finally decided to join us!" he grinned pointing straight towards them both.

The former Krieg pirate stepped up, extending his hand to Zoro. "Hello there. Y'all have my name already. Ah was part ah the Krieg pirates, until Krieg nearly killed me for disobeying him. Naruto saved m'life, an' Ah gave my aid to Don Luffy to defeat my old boss at the Baratie. Aftah that, Don Luffy asked me to join you, and Ah accepted his offer. Vice-Captain Zoro."

The swordsman eyed him carefully, before turning towards Luffy and Usopp. One was smiling, the other nodding with a shrug, proving the story was true. Zoro turned back to the new crewmate and took his hand in a firm grasp.

"Sounds good. Welcome to the crew, Gin. But before anything, stop calling me 'Vice Captain' anymore. That title sounds lame. I'm the First mate, deal?"

"Alright. So, Gin" Kakashi cut in. "Before we go any further. You're likely unaware. But Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura and I are just looking for a way back to our home island. Luffy is the most convenient way to reach that goal, so we joined his crew temporarily. All of us are ninjas and-"

"Ninjas!" the man exclaimed, stars dancing in his eyes. "Whooo Nelly! Never thought Ah'd get lucky enough to be on a crew with pirate ninjas! This crew is getting cooler and cooler by the day."

Kakashi sweat-dropped, while Nami and Sakura were confused, and all the other boys nodded in agreement. "So then. Why don't you tell us about yourself? Your skills? Your likes? Dislikes? Dreams? Desires?"

His composure returning, Gin began to ponder. "Well, 'side from my name, I'm also called "Man-Demon" Gin, with a bounty of 12 million belies on my head. Back with Don Krieg, Ah was chief-of-staff, or a battle commander during a fight. I'm sadist, I'm loyal, and somethin' of a tattoo artist. I enjoy order and results but dislike betrayal or anyone who goes against their word or honour. As for my dream...."

Slowly, one hand rose to Gin's chest, level with his heart. Curling it into a fist, his eyes closed, recalling all he'd lost in the past month.

"My dream for now. Is to sail back to the Grand Line. It's stupid, with no real sense. But that sea invoked real fear in me for the first time in my life, an' Ahh lost a lot ah friends there. For their memory, Ahh wanna go back, to conquer my fear of that sea, and fulfil the ambitions of the crew Ahh sail with, especially Don Luffy's dream to become the King of the Pirates!"

Everyone looked at him, accepting the former enemy with open arms. Particularly for voicing his desire to stand beside them. Even his deep sense of comradeship met Kakashi's silent approval.

"Huh!" Luffy palmed his fist. "Fist-mate! Yeah, I like that better too. There should only be one guy called 'captain,' not a second one! Good thinking Zoro."

"Just doing my job, Captain."

Zoro took the compliment for its worth as everyone else blinked at their slow-minded captain. Nami chose to shrug it aside, turning towards Gin.

"Excuse me, Gin-san?"

"Yeah, what can Ah do for yah, Ma'am?" Gin answered Nami's call.

"I might ask for your help with tattoos in a couple of days," Nami requested, gesturing to her bandaged left shoulder. "I want to get rid

of anything left of Arlong's mark; hopefully by making it into a new design."

Nodding solemnly at the girl, knowing her past, Gin promised to do what he could.

"Ok!" Luffy announced. "Now that you all know Gin, it's Sanji's turn!"

"Hello there," the cook spoke up, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Well, most of you know me already, so, I enjoy cooking, making new recipes, and serving beautiful ladies. I hate people who disrespect a cook or waste food and utterly disgust anybody who would dare harm a lady. So, if anyone here ever tries to hurt a woman, I'll throw Luffy's orders out the window and kick them into the next millennium."

"Hey!" Zoro shot to his feet, shouting at the cook.

"Other than that," the cook continued, ignoring Zoro as a smile larger than Naruto's came over his face.

"I want to go with all of you, to find the All Blue. It's a mystical place in the world, a spot where the East Blue, the West Blue, the North Blue and the South Blue all meet together. A point that contains all the fish from each of those oceans gather. For a cook, to have all those ingredients in one place, it's a wonderland, too amazing to be real."

"A place like that has to be somewhere on the Grand Line. My dream is to find it, proving that it is real beyond any sliver of a doubt! And-"

The grinning cook was cut off, by Zoro whacking him upside the head.

"Were you hearing what I said! You might be part of us now but threatening to go over the captain's head isn't a casual topic. You don't have any grounds to pull a stunt like that! He's an idiot, but

Luffy's word is final, no matter what goes down, even to attack a woman."

Sanji shot to his feet. "What kind of uncouth barbarian would even be thinking about hitting a woman! That thing is a sin against all manhood, moss-head! So, as long as nobody complains about my food and doesn't hurt any women, we won't have any problems, got it!"

"Your terms don't matter, especially if a lady attacks us and useless baggage drags everyone down!" Zoro shot back, drawing his one sword from its sheath. "Give me one good reason why I should let that kind of attitude slide! Especially from the crappy cook talking back to the first mate!"

"You did not just insult my cooking!" Sanji met Zoro, butting foreheads together. "Blunt Brains!"

"What was that!" One second later, Sanji was punched in the face, flying through the doorway and into a tangerine bush.

"No! Not Bellemere's trees!" Nami exclaimed with fear, as Zoro marched past her towards the cook, and was immediately kicked in his head. "Oww! What the hell was that for, Nami!"

"You hurt my mother's precious tangerine trees, Zoro! Don't think I'm going to-"

"Moss-Head!" Sanji roared as a bull, charging for the swordsman with a kick. "This is for upsetting Nami-swan!" Zoro would barely block it with his sheathed Wado Ichimonji; if someone else hadn't run between them!

"Time out-Guuuhhh!" Sakura cried, shooting between both men, trying to stop them. Only for one leg and one sheathed sword to hit the girl square in her face, as a hammer on an anvil!

"Ahhhh! Sakura-cha- "

Pooof!

"Sakura" disappeared in a column of smoke, leaving a battered, bruised, and totally KOed Naruto in her place. "Huh?! Naruto!" Sasuke shouted at the sight, while Kakashi took stock of what happened.

'Substitution, Naruto must've done it to keep Sakura out of danger.'

"Naruto! Is... is he alive?" Sanji questioned everyone, guilt clear in his face.

"Well, he was," Zoro answered. "I hope he... still is," the swordsman croaked in regret.

Neither noticed the furry rising behind them, clocking back one arm, and then shaking the house with a scream.

"YOU MORONS!" Nami exclaimed, pounding them both anywhere she could hit, steaming rage clear on her face and leaving most of the spectators terrified. "How could you both hurt Naruto like that! GET OUT!"

Zoro and Sanji were literally thrown from her house, one quietly with shame, the other with hearts in his eyes. Next, Nami gathered Naruto in her arms to carry him back to Dr. Nako. Sakura hurried behind her, while Sasuke, Gin, Kakashi and Usopp stayed behind.

"Okay, that's enough," the Jonin called to everyone remaining. "All of us are a little tired and pent-up from the dangers of the fight today. How about we all turn in for some sleep? Right, Captain Luffy?"

.... No sound came from the Straw Hat Captain. Looking over at him, the ninjas, Usopp and Gin found Luffy sitting in the corner, his face hidden by the hat.

"Captain Luffy?" Sasuke called over again.

For the hat to slip backwards and reveal Luffy had fallen asleep.

Everyone blinked, before Usopp dropped his face, landing in his palm. "Shoulda seen that coming," the sniper bemoaned.

The others all moved back towards their ship, or, rather most of them did. Zoro and Sanji were walking along until they both felt solid taps near their heads.

Moments later, Zoro woke himself up; deep in a forest, lit only by the moon.

"Huh! What the hell was that?" the swordsman growled going for his sword-to find it missing from his hip. At the loss, Zoro became frozen, until Sanji's cries cut through the darkness.

"Moss head! Did you just tie me up like this!" the cook was upside down, his legs bound with thin, steel wire dangling from a tree.

"Oh, no. The both of you... need to have some details ironed out with me," a creeping, deadly voice slithered to their ears. Fear came to life in both younger men, but neither trembled nor showed any signs of it.

Kakashi stepped out towards them, raising his hands together. "Now, Naruto became hurt moments ago from the pair of you losing control of your petty squabble. A short while back, I promised myself not to let anything of that sort slip by without attention," the Jonin spoke openly, his tone shifting from ominous to iron with every word.

Zoro began to stumble back, naked without any swords, and Sanji was helpless to escape. Both had their eyes trained on Kakashi.

"Hopefully, this will prevent you from repeating that mistake!" raising them, the Jonin's hands settled in a rat sign: "Genjutsu: Death Mirage Jutsu."

Staying in place, Kakashi watched the pair, with wide eyes following his move, anticipating the results to come.

One moment passed.... another.... a full minute. And nothing changed.

Kakashi's eye furrowed on his brow, while the cook and the swordsman tilted their heads, confused.

"Something wrong with your ninja powers, Kakashi? Or does this one take a minute to kick in?" Zoro questioned him.

"Genjutsu: Death Mirage Jutsu," the cyclops-ninja repeated. Still, no reactions came from his targets with their eyesight clear on himself. Kakashi's single eyes frowned, dropping his arms, to stand with ease and curiosity.

'What is going on? I meant to punish them through those illusions, and their own lack of any background in ninja arts made it highly probable that the effects were fool-proof. But nothing I happening to either of them,' the Jonin's mind raced at this revelation.

'Maybe-?' Kakashi shifted his head-band, revealing his sharingan eye at the pair. Training it on both, he employed a sharingan-genjutsu over each of them.

Zoro formed a light snarl, shifting into a fighting posture, while cursing himself for the current predicament. 'How could I lose my sword this easily, and with curly brow tied up there, he'll be no use at all! This is a mess, and if it were with anyone else, both of us could fall since I'm not at my best.'

"Zoro-san. Sanji-san," Kakashi addressed his new crewmates, hiding his left eye once again.

"I'm still less than pleased from how Sakura was nearly hurt, and even more so that Naruto was struck by you both. This... will be a warning. You've both done well today and led me to an important discovery. For now, both of you can spend the night here. Or, rather, Sanji will while Zoro searches for his sword. I hid it somewhere

around here," the Hatake joked, sweeping one arm around the clearing.

"I suppose a little exercise will work things out. Zoro has to find his sword but is not allowed to return to the ship until he cuts Sanji from those ninja wires. Good night."

With that, Kakashi vanished into smoke, before Zoro could gain his whiff over the idea of Wado Ichimonji thrown aside like a cheap toy.

"Hurry up Moss head!" Sanji's voice snapped him from that concept. "I've gotta pee up here!"

Meanwhile, across the island, Genzo was standing near Bellemere's grave. Holding two bottles in his arm, the man uncorked one, before pouring it over the cross.

"Bellemere. Your daughters are strong young women now. Just a glance at them and it's like seeing you all over again. They both have different ideas and dreams, but we know you'd never stop them from anything they'd do, so long as they remembered the family you made with them."

Closing his eyes, recalling the happier times with that woman, Genzo's lips curled in a smile, looking back towards the ruins of Arlong Park, its looming, ominous shape whipped from the earth, for good.

"All of us can finally rest and enjoy our lives again. All that we lost; every sacrifice that was made cannot be undone. But nor will they be forgotten, you most of all. We aren't going to waste a single moment," he swore.

Looking down with a smile at a dear friend's final place of rest, the man could feel only content. The silence somehow assured him of newfound peace spreading to everyone in his home, especially to a single brave mother whose company he now kept.

"RRHHHHIIW WWWAAAANNNNN MMMMMRR'RRRRE
MMMEEEOOHHHHTTTT!"

Genzo nearly jumped six feet high at the shout. Whirling about to look behind himself... Luffy was standing near a tree with several roasts in one hand, a cup in the other, and his mouth full of two bones. He swallowed, then spat out chicken bones to the side.

"I said I want more meat! We're almost out back on the ship. Hey, where is everyone?" Glancing right and left, the pirate was the picture of confusion.

"Hello there, Straw-Hat," Genzo spoke in a low, serious tone. "Listen. The Marines are coming in a few days to get Arlong. If you need it, go hunting on another island nearby to pick up extra meat. Otherwise, things might become dangerous here."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, right. I don't wanna run into them again. Thanks, old pin-wheel guy," Luffy nodded. "Hey, a grave? Did somebody die right there?" he questioned, pointing up at the spot where a brave mother now rested, watching over those she left behind.

"Yes. This is where Nami and Nojiko's mother now lies. Bellemere," Genzo explained, coming to a decision.

Luffy blinked. 'Uhh, what did Makino tell Ace and me about this? Oh, yeah.' Stepping forward, he stood next the Genzo, bowing his head towards the cross. "I am sorry. Nami is okay now. I give to you my condolenzzees."

The next moment, he turned around towards the village and his nakama.

"Boy!" Genzo called him back, with total seriousness in his soul.

"Nami. I know she has decided to join you. And that crew you've made on your adventures. Right?"

"Uh-huh. That's right. I won't have anyone else but Nami be our navigator. That's why I chased her here in the first place after she left," Luffy answered, with innocent honesty.

"Then... listen. Nami is happy. For the first time in years, she is smiling again. She has her mind made up to go with you, and nothing I do or say can stop it. But..."

"... but becoming a pirate is dangerous business. I'm fine with her going with you, but some of your crew don't have my full confidence. Like that Sasuke-kid, for hurting her right here in this spot three days ago. So, if someone else hurts her, or if anyone you do anything to take her smile away."

Genzo's eyes met Luffy's, with a strength that carried the weight of his own world in them. From all the strength he had, even with the knowledge that Luffy's own surpassed his by several miles, the man still spoke; "If I hear you failed her. Then I will kill you. Even if I die trying myself."

Luffy looked on at him, thinking back towards what the man had spoken about Sasuke. Next, an image of Naruto choking on gas came up in his head, followed by Usopp passing out in a clinic, Sanji nearly killed by Arlong, and a broken Nami stabbing herself in the streets.

Grasping each of those, Luffy made a deep promise to himself. 'My nakama got hurt, when I wasn't there, and wasn't strong enough. Ace told me once that I was too easy and playful to be a good captain. And he[1] agreed with him. I wasn't good enough; I wasn't around, and I didn't think hard-ow!'

A headache came into Luffy's mind, at all the thinking he was doing. Still, the pictures of his injured nakama dominated his thoughts, throwing aside any sense of fun, whims or easy ways through anything.

As he raised his head to meet Genzo in the eye, the lawman stumbled back, fearful of the power behind Luffy's gaze. "My nakama got hurt because I wasn't good enough. Then I protected them from Arlong and stopped Nami from crying. Dangers will come, and they will get hurt. But I will become a better captain so I can always save my nakama, no matter who we fight in our way! And I'll never take on anyone who would hurt a friend. Ever!"

Luffy's oath was enough to shake anyone to their core. His words reached up to another figure, present, but unseen.

"Nami is my nakama. I want to become the King of Pirates, but that doesn't matter if I can't have my friends beside me to do it! I'll die before any of them lose their smile or lose their dreams. No matter what," the Straw hat swore, to himself most of all. With a new sense of what he had to do, greater than any time before.

The celebrations for Arlong's defeat lasted for another two entire days. The Straw Hats were guests on honour across the entire island all that time. But all things have to end; and with the Marines due to arrive, the crew decided to make their way out at the first open opportunity.

During that time, Sakura and Nami had been working to help her pack up and prepare. Even managed to move several trees from her family's grove onto the Going Merry, with Naruto and Luffy both eager to help.

The Straw Hat Captain gradually become more and more involved with his crew. Checking on each of them and asking about what they needed to bring for the next part of their journey. Whenever he wasn't distracted by food, singing, and stories, leaving his crew with some sense of normalcy about their captain.

On the 2nd day, Nami sat down with Gin, explaining what she wanted to do. After carefully removing her bandages, Gin glanced over her shoulder. Looking between it and a drawing Nami had given

him, he assessed how and where different parts of it could be modified.

"The pattern's good enough to match, Nami. Do you wanna wait a couple days first? All the stabs you gave yahself are gonna make that spot tender-some for a while."

The girl only gave one, tiny grin at his answer. "I know. Stabbing it was stupid, but... I literally couldn't do anything else to him at that moment. Please....just....Get. It. Off. Me." With her heart in her throat at the plea, Gin couldn't say no.

It took a handful of hours, but soon all was done. Arlong's mark was erased, leaving a new mark in blue on her shoulder; four spinning ends, curling towards the right, with a single tangerine off the top one.

"There. It'll need a few touch-ups over the coming days. But are ya happy with it, ma'am?" Gin asked his new crewmate. Nami stood up, examining it in the mirror, smiling brighter than the sun.

"Oh, that's so cool!" A new voice shouted at them, as Naruto came in through the doorway.

"Hey, can I get one! Can It? Can I? Can I?" he began begging the pair.

Gin only shrugged, "Why not? You only live once, kid. What kinda mark do you want?"

Naruto frowned, one hand under his chin, trying to think over what to get. Nami chuckled at the sight, finding his concentration face all too adorable.

"Hey, Naruto. Before you hurt yourself thinking too hard, I might have one idea."

"Hey, I never hurt myself thinking! Huh? What is it, Nami?" the boy cried, then growing more interested than slighted. Nami nearly frowned, 'he's almost as excitable as Luffy.'

"The easiest way to tell if someone is a pirate is from their jolly-roger. It's a skull and cross-bones that gets painted on their flag. But each pirate crew always designs their own, to add new images that they like."

"Since Luffy is our captain, we use a skull and a straw hat as our mark. But why don't you get a skull with your own designs on it? You're very own jolly Roger."

Naruto loved the idea. "Okay! Uhhh... Hey, how about this!" pointing up at his headband.

"Gin! This head-band. In my village, you can only wear it after graduating to become a ninja! And this one is real special to me! My teacher, Iruka-sensei, tried it on after I saved his life from Mizuki! Can you make a skull that looks like me with this on its forehead! And put in the same spot as Nami's tattoo!"

Gin nodded, asking Naruto to sit down while he prepared his tools, and took out some fresh paper to design the image.

By morning on the third day, Zoro had been cleared by Dr. Nako to leave, and Luffy was eager to get going before more Marines showed up. Most of the crew were gathered around the Going Merry, loading the last of their new supplies, while Sanji was wearing a spare set of pants borrowed from Zoro.

The chef ignored every question about it, looking through the kitchen to learn about his new workspace on the Going Merry. Most of the townspeople were standing by the docks, with Johnny and Yosaku among them. Both bounty hunters decided to stay in the village, protecting it from any future pirates and to give Arlong over to the Marines once they arrived.

Sanji had even left his personal boat behind, for the pair to use if the need ever came. "Now that I'm with Captain Luffy, this ship will be all I need, plus an extra boat would slow us down for any quick getaways," the chef had reasoned.

"Thank you big-bro Sanji," Johnny replied, then began to scratch the back of his head, guiltily.

"Plus, it actually helps us out a bit. To start up a new business Yosaku and I want to have."

"Really!" Zoro called over, hearing what his old friends were speaking about. "You two leaving bounty-hunting behind, or is this a side business?"

The pair began shifting, tapping their feet and looking anywhere that a Straw Hat wasn't. Yosaku finally raised one hand to his chin, looking at Zoro with a deeply serious gaze.

"Johnny and I can't thank you enough for what you've done for us. And it was good to see big-bro Zoro again and all. But, right now, our regular jobs were bounty hunters. Arlong and his crew will bring a lot of money from the Marines and we certainly won't let him terrorize another group again."

"However," Johnny took over for his partner. "Yosaku and I would have to fight with you again, one day, for professional reasons. The thing is, we don't want to. This is goodbye for now, and I hope we meet again someday."

Placing two hands on his hips, the shades-wearing man grinned up at the crew. "So, after giving it some very careful thought. Yosaku and I decided to start a fishing business right here in Cocoyoshi village. We'll still grow stronger and protect it from other pirates. But this way, we can see you again, or you and come here without any problems from us fighting you!"

Zoro grinned at the pair, then gave each a nod. Walking over to both, he shook hands goodbye with each before promising to see them again, once he defeated Mihawk and claimed the title he sought for. With the last goodbyes made, everyone was standing around, waiting. And waiting. And even waiting some more. The last two members of the crew had yet to arrive, yet.

"Come on, how much longer!" Luffy's voice shouted through the crowd. "Old man Kakashi needs to get here for us to get going! And Nami's missing too!"

Sure enough, the legendary late-comer Kakashi had not arrived yet, leaving everyone deeply antsy by his absence.

"Uhhgg. Why'd we let sensei wander off like this!? It's almost like he wants to be late for anything and everything!" Naruto piled his antsiness up there with Luffy's

"I'm sorry, Captain Luffy," Sakura tried to placate the impatient captain. "Kakashi-sensei might be taking care of something real important, and is just running behind," she reasoned, while internally, another voice was shouting about smashing the Jonin around like a pinball for being late again.

Usopp and Zoro lifted the last crate of supplies on board, while far back near a house, Nami was spying on the ship with similar opinions. 'Where is that grey-haired, tardy bum? If he's not here fast, the chance to pick all those pockets will pass by wasted!' she fumed, silently.

"Well, if Nami and Kakashi aren't here maybe we should leave her. Her village is safe now, so she did achieve her goal. Any reasons to come along might be gone," Usopp's opinion came on the deck.

"What!" Sanji exclaimed. "Without Nami-swan around, I have like 98.72% less reason to be here! What about me and my dreams too, she can't be selfish enough to only focus on herself!"

"Hey!" Luffy countered, pointing one finger straight at his cook. "I'm still mad at you and Zoro for hitting Naruto. And don't think about walking off just like that."

"No!" Luffy's voice came around the crew, palming one fist in his hand. "Nami's our navigator, and I came here just for that. We'll just go look for her and then get going. Old man Kakashi might be having a nap right now, then he'll come to the boat," the captain declared.

Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke each blinked, before pondering Luffy's words a touch closer. 'That might be why Kakashi was late every day back in the Leaf Village,' Sasuke reasoned until a splash came from the port side of the boat.

"Yo, everyone! No need to search for me. I'm right here."

The voice came right behind Sasuke, leading the Uchiha to look upward and find the missing sensei right beside him, waving a hand to greet them.

The entire crew erupted:

"You're late!" "What's give, sensei! You said you'd stop that, datebayo!"

"We've all been waiting, Old Man! Next time don't take a nap right next to when we leave!"

"Hey, were you trying to flirt or plan something with Nami and scarred her off, pervert!"

"You don't get to wander off whenever you want, Kakashi-san! Especially after stealing my sword like that!"

The entire crew, save their missing female, were glaring at the Jonin. Who simply waved it off without a care.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeee.....the path of life led me to that sea cow on the bottom of the bay. Leaving the poor soul there would be terrible

animal cruelty, so I let it go, and it swam away in terror."

Everyone blinked, while Sakura, Sasuke and Zoro got stuck recalling the sea monster they found on the way.

"Well, ya here now. Only Nami's yet to show up on board," Gin nodded at the ninja, before turning over to Naruto. "Hey, kid. How's yer shoulder feelin'. And ya haven't been rubbin' it, like Ah said, have ya?"

Naruto nodded, eagerly, assuring Gin he didn't want to mess it up. Before anyone could ask what they meant, the other latecomer finally appeared.

"Set the sails! Let's get going" a woman's yell travelled through the crowd and the crew. Nami was standing up the hill nearly 80 meters away. With everyone's eyes on her, she broke into a run, building speed up towards the Merry.

"Ahhhh, why is she running like that? I don't get it," Usopp threw out a question.

"She said to set sail, why would she do it if she hasn't even gotten on board yet?" Sakura joined him.

Down on the wharf, Genzo put the pieces together. "No. She's trying to leave us without letting any of us thank her or say goodbye!"

"Oh, well if doesn't want a scene, it's time to get going!" Kakashi hurriedly spoke. Quickly, he and Luffy began to unfurl the sails, while Zoro lifted the anchor. Naruto complained about not getting some attention, but the other genin shoved him along with the others. Soon, the boat was moving away from the docks, ready to leave.

Some of the villagers tried to stop Nami, but none could touch the girl. Ducking, weaving, even twirling around, Nami lost no momentum in her dash for the Merry. Reaching the edge of the docks, she leapt off as hard as she could.

But, the girl made one, big mistake. With six extra members than before, the Merry met the current and soon became too far away for her to jump aboard.

Halfway in the air, she began falling for the water! "Nami-swan! I'll catch you, my love!" Sanji quickly made his own leap from the railing but never made it close.

Luffy's arms shot ahead even faster than the cook, wrapping around her waist and pulling Nami close to himself. The girl felt solid wood under her feet, and Luffy's strong arm across her waist brought a light blush to her cheeks, before standing upright with a smile.

"Ahhhh Nami! Are you happy to be in my arms?" Sanji asked, hearts blinding his eyes. Curling his lips for a kiss, the cook opened them to a shock. He was in Kakashi's arms, after being caught inches from the water down below, and brought back to the deck.

"Cook-san, please, do not kiss me," the Hatake deadpan at the cook. "You are not Nami, and nor am I inclined to have-" Sanji quickly flew back to his feet, scurrying all the way to the other side of the ship. Until "Oooooo. It looks like Nami is about to remove her shirt," those words froze Sanji cold.

Sure enough, the girl was lifting them he of a new white top she wore, moving high enough to spot one under-boob. And spill several dozen purses, wallets, jewels and more out from under it, pilling at her feet.

"What!" "Hey!" "Why wallet is missing!" "She took all our cash!"

"My purse is gone!" "Each of them got swiped!"

Shouts of awe from everyone left behind came erupting. Nami simply raised a pair of notes to her lips, kissing them before facing back at her home.

"Thanks a BUNCH!"

The girl continued waving back at everyone she'd scammed, with Zoro and Usopp groaning behind her, Gin and Sasuke unbothered, and Kakashi, Naruto and Sakura looking on confused.

Luffy was laughing hard as ever, with a fierce grin at his entire crew together, ready for the next stage of their journey. Until, strangely, a touch landed on his shoulder, with a voice clear in his ear. "Not a bad catch, kid. Look after my girl, for whatever she wants."

The rubber man looked around, only to find the faint trace of a woman, with fuchsia hair styled in a mohawk, grinning down at him, before fading in the breeze.

"I'll miss you, take care! And Nojiko! Don't forget to write, and I'll send some letters back to you as well!" Nami cried back, bidding her home a safe and heartfelt farewell.

3 days after the Straw Hats had left Cocoyoshi Village, a single warship continued cruising over the seas, making for the very location they had left.

On board, several Marines kept the ship in order, while others had circled a ring in the centre of the deck, watching a bespectacled woman sparring with two fellow recruits. Elsewhere at the masthead, their commanding officer took in the situation with deep annoyance, lighting a fresh cigar to join the two others still in his mouth.

Marine Captain Smoker cast his gaze outwards to the open seas, his mind beset by a storm of fury at the recall of the very situation before him.

'I also felt something rotten about that lowly excuse for a colonel. But this news about Nezumi's corruption is a serious matter even for him. Headquarters is breathin' down my neck now and want to know the facts. This better be worth my time,' the Logia-type growled in his thoughts.

Looking back towards the deck, his own protégé Tashigi stood tall and balanced with her sword levelled at the downed opponents groaning at her knees. Looking up at her mentor, the girl's inquiring smile received a stern nod from Smoker; before the girl's eyesight shifted beyond him and her face grew with shock.

Tashigi removed her glasses, rapidly cleaning them, then blinked as they cleared her vision once again. For a moment, her mouth hung agape, until the sense of the new arrivals clicked in her mind.

"Sir! Captain Smoker, sir! Vessel approaching the starboard, with some kilometres of distance! It's Vice-Admiral Garp's personal vessel, sir!"

At the Sergeant Major's word, everyone's attention was drawn in that exact direction. Sure enough, one, large Marine warship was in clear sight after leaving the cover of an island several kilometres away. The vessel was unmistakably a Headquarters Warship, with a dog house in place of the crow's-nest and the oversized prow of a mastiff bull-dog munching on a bone clear for all on board.

'Sharp girl. That is the "Hero's" ship, no doubt at all. What's he doin' all the way out here!'

Smoker thought, grinning at the idea of meeting Garp in person. "All hands to action stations! Helmsman bring us alongside them! Tashigi, get the den-den mushi and set the dials to Vice-Admiral Garp's designation!" Smoker's voice rang over his boat. Following their orders, each and every Marine assumed their regulation position as the ship began moving over to the new vessel.

Minutes later, a gangplank connected one ship to the other, with Smoker showing a rare sense of deference by leaving his ship to approach the superior officer's command. Only to find the suited man standing tall, donned in a white officer's suit and the mask of a bulldog covering his face, munching on a doughnut.

Smoker, with Tashigi at his side, gave his salutes to the "Hero of the Marines" and his right-hand man, Bogard. The latter replied with a nod, while his boss continued munching.

"Vice-Admiral Garp. Can I ask to know what has brought you all the way out here to the East Blue?"

"Hmmm. Well, it's nice to run into a fresh brat like you again, Smoker. And drop the 'Vice-Admiral' crap, you know I don't care about formalities."

Taking another bite, the grinning man surprised all the rest of the Smoker's crew with his uncaring attitude.

"I might answer that question if you do the same?" Garp replied, nodding down his head for another bite from his snack.

Tashigi stood straighter than any other officer among them, with a backbone of iron and too in-awe to speak. Even as her own superior gave their answer, working through his cigars with growing tension and anger.

"A handful of days ago, some bastard called me in Loguetown about a case of corrupt Marines around a place called Cocoyoshi village. Apparently, that fuckin' punk Nezumi's been taking bribes from a Fishman pirate called Arlong, letting his crew run loose over some villages in the area for the past 8 years runnin'."

The man waited for the Vice-Admiral's response....

[illegible]

From a prolonged snore, a certain man's head fell backwards, blowing a single nose-bubble from his narcoleptic habit.

Everyone blinked, barely staving off the sense to gawk at the scene.

'Should this man still truly be a Vice-Admiral?' Tashigi questioned, silently.

'He is approaching his 80s at the least. Though I admire and applaud his dedication and diligence in the continued fight for justice, falling asleep so suddenly must be due to how difficult it is for him to remain so poised, stoic and powerful. I would never imagine someone of a higher rank sleeping on their duties so suddenly and randomly.'

Thankful not speaking of it allowed spared a certain Ice-man from an unpleasant sneeze. While in the East Blue, Garp woke himself up and began a raucous chuckle.

"Bwahahahahahahahahahahahahaha! Dozed off again, didn't I? Gotta catch'em where I can to have a shot at that world record for munching down the most doughnuts in a single sitting. But what are you talking about, Smoker?"

Smoker's teeth began to grind, frustrated at the delay in getting to the bottom of his case, but still repeated his answer without complaint.

"But that ain't the worst of it, sir." Smoker paused for a moment, focusing past his growing resentment, conjoined with memories of a spunky young girl from their days training with one another. **1**

"The report detailed how this Arlong guy murdered a fellow Marine, Bellemere right after he arrived. And Nezumi swept that act slide under the rug with his corruption"

Nobody on either ship moved at that news. Bogard's hat tipped forward, shading the man's opinions under its brim, while Garp had stopped eating.

More details followed from Smoker, along with his intentions to land in the Conomi Islands to investigate the truth in the matter.

"The whistle-blower is a guy called Genzo. According to him, another pirate crew came to his home with some beef against Arlong. Some perps called the "Straw Hat" pirates showed up, left Nezumi's crew in the dust and defeated the Arlong Pirates single-handedly. Some new

group under a guy called Monkey D. Luffy's captainship. Haven't heard much about this new pirate but-

"WHAAAAAAAAAATTTTTTTT!"

Even jumped at the roar from Monkey D. Garp, some overboard and others totally out of their skin. Crushing the doughnuts in his fist, the other shaking, his outrage clear for every Marine to watch.

"Are you serious, Smoker! Did you just say Monkey D. Luffy was a pirate captain! And he beat up another pirate crew!" the Vice-Admiral demanded, yanking the Marine Captain off his feet by the collar and shaking the man back and forth.

"Garp, sir. There is not an excuse here for you to man-handle fellow officers like this," Bogard spoke from Garp's shoulder.

"Please, put him down and ask about things a little more productively."

Most of the group on the opposite ship were quaking in fear, worried about what could have sent a Vice-Admiral to become this wound-up. While Tashigi was gripping her sword but totally unsure of what to do.

'Why can't Captain Smoker get away with his Logia Powers?' her bewildered thoughts came to mind.

The next moment, Garp blinked his eyes, dropping the Captain into a heap on the deck and folding two arms across his chest.

"Smoker. I'll repeat myself. Was the guy who beat up these Arlong Pirates called Monkey D. Luffy? And he's a pirate now, but he attacked a corrupt Marine?"

Smoker glared up at his superior, his own feelings professional and fearful.

'Garp's always been an eccentric guy, everyone at headquarters knows that. But what could have set him off to manhandle me this suddenly?'

"Yes, sir. The man who reported everything even had Nezumi's official logbook with the correct identification numbers, and it lines up with a few more Marine crews that have gone missing close by."

"I was on my way to take a look and arrest each of the Fishmen myself but had to leave Loguetown to handle it. Maybe even run into this Captain Luffy and get his side of things."

Garp merely glared at the officer, before turning around to gaze out over the seas, towards Foosha Village.

'Damn it Dadan, why the hell did another one become a pirate? First Ace runs off, and the next moment I'm not looking, Kiddo turns around and does the same. And he's beating up other pirates-'

"Hey!" Garp exclaimed, slamming one fist into his open palm. Everyone jumped again, worried about what the man would do next, while Garp kept his thoughts to himself.

'He just beat up another big Pirate crew and avenged a Marine officer! Maybe Luffy will find he likes beating up pirates more than being one! If I find him and nail that home, then he'll finally join the Navy!'

'So, the big question is, where will he be next?'

"Bogard!"

"Yes, Vice-Admiral!" the adjunct snapped to his superior's side.

"How far away is it from here to Loguetown from this Cocoyoshi Village? And how skilled was this Arlong Guy?"

After a little book-checking, Bogard dug up Arlong's reputation and how it likely takes 7 days to sail from the Conomi Islands to

Loguetown without any distractions.

Garp nodded looking back to his feet while deciding what to do next.

'The only thing Luffy ever does directly is run to a dinner table. The brat'll take his time, but after getting his own crew and beating a pirate who survived in the New World he'll probably go straight for Reverse Mountain. I was gonna pick up Ax-Hand Morgan and then head straight back to Sengoku with'im. But if someone else went there while I-'

"Owwwww!" Garp groaned sharply, raising one hand to his forehead.

'Damn, I'm getting' a headache from this much-complicated thinkin'.'

"Sir, are you doing alright, Garp?"

Turning towards the voice, Garp's eyes became fixated on Smoker.

"Do you want to handle this incident with Arlong and Nezumi? I did leave my post at Loguetown to pursue this and will turn back on your orders. Or do you want to handle your own priorities and let me deal with Straw Hat and Arlong?"

In that moment, two different light bulbs inside of Garp's mind lit up.

"Well, I was on my way to handle another report about a rouge Marine. That egotistical dunderhead Ax-hand Morgan. But either you or I could stop by Cocoyoshi Village and look into this business with Arlong and the Rat, Nezumi. Meanwhile, this guy Luffy will probably make for Loguetown and move into the Grand Line. I want to head him off before that happens."

"So, these are my orders for you, Smoker."

End.

[1]- This is Sabo. In the series, Ace did not use Sabo's name even on his deathbed, and in Dressrosa Luffy only referred to him as "the guy

who died much earlier." Losing him was, evidently, so painful to both that they never used his name again.

And that is the wrap to the Arlong Pirates Arc; and the start of a new adventure, with some fresh excitement.

My motivations to introduce this possible change to the story, is from how much the Loguetown Arc is reused by other Fanfic writers. It was a crucial point in the One Piece story, but the vast majority of One Piece fanfics all just rush through Loguetown or leave it to play out exactly like the canon; a trope so consistent, it's often becomes boring. Something all the most frustrating by how crucial that arc is and changing anything too drastic may upset the subsequent stages of One Piece just as much.

I want to avoid that as much as possible and make Growth Through Chaos very original while without deviating too much from canon-storyline.

Garp in Loguetown was something Oda likely didn't use to save the exposition for an explosive unveiling years later; something he executed brilliantly. But now, anyone who follows One piece knows Luffy's paternal parentage, so keeping it a thorough secret is somewhat redundant.

Still, the Classic-canon does remain classic from how familiar and amazing it is.

So, who should the Straw Hat's face in Loguetown: Captain Smoker, or Vice-Admiral Garp? This choice will have consequences on the who story, and both will be far from one-sided, and have several consequences:

- 1.** Monkey D. Dragon is still out there. Even if Garp goes to Loguetown, he can stone-wall the "Hero of the Marines" if Kakashi gets tied-up, so the Straw Hats can make an escape. However, they haven't encountered one another in-canon each other yet, so a lot of speculation would be involved between the pair.

2. Whomever goes to Loguetown, the other will get to deal with Arlong and take Coby and Helmeppo under their wing. Can anyone image Coby with Smoker as a mentor?

3. It means Buggy and Alvida will have to deal with either Smoker or Garp, all the while trying to kill Luffy. Something that is really, really not a good idea if his Grandpa is around. Plus, they might learn about their relationship, and Buggy definitely met Garp more than once with Gol D. Roger.

4. It means Zoro will meet Tashigi at a later date in the story. I promise it will still happen, and if she isn't there, then after some additional growth, the two of them can have a better confrontation in the Alabasta Arc.

5. This would remove the majority of Smoker and Luffy's rivalry, leaving him more focused on Coby and Helmeppo.

6. Since Kakashi did not fight with Arlong, he'll be matched-up against whomever is leading the Marines. Smoker's Logia Powers, or Garp's sheer power, are certainly enough to seriously threaten Kakashi, who's the only Straw Hat who can actually stand a chance against either one.

Garp does drastically outweighs Kakashi in Strength and Power, but so does Might Guy. Guy is arguably faster than Garp, and both use similar wrecking-ball mindsets in a fight. Making "the Hero's" straight-forward approach to fighting something Kakashi can deal with slightly better opposed to Logia-powers, and Smoker's more dynamic options in a fight.

One final parting note: Luffy's bounty. Nezumi is a disgraced Marine, so he won't be able to place a bounty on Luffy's head. That job will fall to Smoker, whether by learning about Luffy's exploits across the East Blue, or from confronting him in Loguetown first-hand.

So, Vote: Who should the Straw Hat's face in Loguetown: Captain Smoker, or Monke

Dreams, Development

Chapter 16: Dreams, Development and Dangers:

Kakashi's training begins.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece.

Reminder: Everyone has until the next chapter to vote on the Loguetown Marine set to meet Luffy: Garp or Smoker.

If you haven't vote through a review or a PM to me.

Thank you to my Beta Reader Leaf Ranger for reading this chapter.

Sakura Haruno was smiling, comfy and warm floating in the air. A gentle sigh came from her dreams, rolling over in her sleep-

-to crash on the floor head-first.

"Oww! Ow-ow-ow-ow!" Throwing her hands to the ground, Sakura brought one near her left ear, rubbing the crown just above it to sooth a sharp ache on her head.

"Hmmm? Oh, are you okay, Sakura?"

Came Nami's voice, with a gentle hand rubbing the same place over her own. The pinkette slowly took her bearings, looking around to find a pretty room, occupied with a bookshelf before her, an elegant sofa and store chest, and a two-person bar in the far corner.

'Where am... oh, that's right. I'm in the girl's cabin of the Going Merry with Miss. Nami.'

Glancing up to find her roommate sitting at a desk, Sakura smiled at Nami's concern. Then caught a hammock in the corner of her eye, spanning the width of the room from the hatch in the roof.

She quickly groaned, "Miss. Nami. Please don't tell anyone how I fell out of my hammock."

Smiling down, Nami decided to forgo her usual fees, all too glad to have another girl aboard the crew.

"Well, I did tell you so last night. How about next time you use a blanket on the floor like I suggested? Beds are a lot more comfy to sleep in. Still, I bet the boys aren't doing any better, aside from those on the night shift up on deck."

On their first night aboard, Nami had no problems sharing a room with Sakura, but the 8 boys on board made finding space to sleep, challenging. With only six hammocks and one couch plus the mast in the centre, several storage barrels and Zoro's training weights, space inside the men's cabin became a premium. Naruto had tried to use a henge to argue for himself to stay in the girl's room, for Nami to knock him overboard one second later.

In the end, Gin and Kakashi solved the issue. The experienced sailor suggested a night shift for the crew. Gin and Zoro took the first shifts while everyone else slept; as well as they could between Luffy and Naruto snoring.

Now in the bright and ready morning, Sakura got to her feet, brushing down her plain red pyjamas; the same she had slept in since leaving Konohagakure 2 months ago, now.

"Miss Nami, did Sanji call everyone for breakfast, yet?"

"Not yet, but I did hear him shouting at Luffy to get out of the kitchen a short time ago. Now that you're awake, let's head up and see what's going on." With her reply, Nami stood up from her desk, wearing a loose white shirt over bright blue panties, tied on by two knots at her hips. Walking to a storage chest near the sofa, she bent over, sparking a jolt of jealousy from Sakura.

'Wow, how did Miss Nami get her butt so bubbly!?' the girl silently exclaimed

"CHAAAA! THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE!" Inner Sakura exclaimed, flailing left and right with envy.

"NOBODY SHOULD BE THAT SEXY AND ONLY SIX YEARS OLDER THAN I AM! THAT'S TOTALLY UNFAIR! I'M GONNA GET HER SECRETS OUT NO MATTER WHAT IT TAKES!"

Ignorant of those thoughts, Nami began to frown and rummage around in the chest, bouncing her lower assets left and right towards the other girl. Then she finally stood up, holding two sets of clothes in her arms. Staring at the smaller ones for some moments, she took a glance at the preteen kunoichi with her.

"Sakura? How many outfits do-"

Out of nowhere, a horrid tearing exploded from above them, "AAAAHHHHH! No! My Special seat!" Luffy's voice rang through the ship, following the sound of wood shattering to splinters against pure destructive force.

"DAAAA-You careless barbarian! Kaya gave us this ship, so don't go about breaking it like that!" Ussop's indignant cries followed. Sparking both Nami and Sakura to bolt for the hatch.

Outside in the morning sunlight, the girls found their sniper acting quite reckless, whacking Luffy's head left and right with a hammer. Before either could ask why, they saw a chunk of the mast was missing, with splinters littered around the jagged hole and the

sheep's figure-head prow totally missing from its place. All as a strong gust beset the ship, sending anything loose fluttering high.

"What just happened out here!" Nami cried as the rest of the crew assembled behind her, all of them catching a rare sight as she felt cool air brushing her rear.

"WWWWWHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"AHHHHHHHH! YYYEEEEAAAAHHHHH! WOOOOOO! Nami-swan, thank you for this exquisite morning appearance!" Both of the girls turned around, to find Sanji's legs shaping into formless noodles, blood dripping from his nose and heart-filled eyes trained towards Nami's exposed waist. While Ussop continued shouting with pervy-glee, before shooting ram-rod straight and bowing towards Nami; "THANK YOU VERY MUCH!"

The girl made a mortified yelp, yanking the hem of her shirt to cover herself, then looking up with fury.

To see a blur of pink shooting forward to kick Sanji in the face. Nami quickly joined with two strong fists before another kick from Sakura sent the pervy-cook fly overboard. Next, the females turned on Ussop, who'd had enough willpower to run away and hide below deck to escape.

Kakashi watched, hiding his own blush and chuckles at the view of such a supple beauty, as Nami dashed inside to find some clothes, then turned his attention over to Zoro.

"Luffy! What the hell!? Why'd you be that careless and wreck our ship!" the First-mate exclaimed, as he pinned the younger man against the deck head-first. Luffy struggled to push him off for a few moments. But Zoro simply glared down, eager to avoid any blame.

"Now, Zoro. Why don't everyone quiet down, and we talk about what happened," a voice came to his ear.

'Kakashi?' Zoro thought, looking to the side, where the Jonin stood at his shoulder. Gin was just inches away, holding back a certain courageous coward from slamming a hammer into Zoro's ear. 'When did Ussop come back up here?'

"He and Luffy are both to blame, Kakashi!" the sniper declared.

"One of them asked about sparring together, then that same moron's punch missed Zoro and took out a chunk of the mast before knocking the Merry's figurehead clean off."

"And Zoro is just as bad about it, because if he'd taken the hit then the ship wouldn't have been broken!" Ussop recounted, with one finger pointing straight at the swordsman.

At this, everyone looked at the pair; Luffy was flailing around trying to get free, while Zoro kept his eyes sideways to deflect any blame.

"Uhhh....this can't be my fault! If it had hit, my wounds would've opened again!" he mumbled an excuse.

Before anyone could react, a shadow burst between them before getting caught by Kakashi.

"Let me at them! Let me at them! Those perverts need to pay up!" Nami shouted, now sporting navy-blue shorts and thrashing around the get free and collect some payback.

"Alright, *enough!*".....

Nobody moved; the Genin especially. Kakashi's commanding voice left nearly each and everyone aboard frozen in their place. All but Luffy, who kept struggling to escape Zoro's grasp.

Kakashi glanced around, before continuing in a more relaxed tone.

"Sasuke. Go retrieve Sanji before he can drift away. Sakura. The figurehead got launched out to the northwest and is likely behind us now. See if you can drag it through the water to bring the missing

piece back here. Ussop. Get some nails from below deck and a few boards of wood to patch up the mast. Naruto, Gin and Zoro. Bring the ship around the meet Sakura and Sasuke."

Everyone nodded, the Genin jumping over the side to run for their missing pieces. While the rest began to sheath-sails and turn the Merry starboard.

Soon, Luffy finally wiggled free, standing up to brush his hat.

"Thanks for finally letting me up, Old-man Kakashi. Oh, USSOP! I'M SORRY ABOUT THE MERRY!" the Rubber-man shouted, enough to rock the entire ship. Before dashing to the railing to scan the horizon; his head jerking left and right.

"Where is it! Oh, man, where's my special seat go! I've gotta catch it somehow!"

Luffy was darting all around the deck, trying to spot the missing piece of his beloved ship.

"Luffy, it's out over there!" Nami pointed for him, standing at the corner to point behind the ship. "And Ussop! Don't think you're off the hook! You each owe me another 100,000 bellies! And Gin as well, don't think I didn't know where you were looking!"

The man-demon fumbled his load at those words, blushing at the reminder before cursing at the money he owed.

'Hmmm?' Luffy followed Nami's hand to look out the starboard side towards the stern. 'Hmmmmmm... my seat, my seat, my seat, my seat-' "Ah-ha! There it is! Wow, Sakura found it already! That water-running thing is just so cool!" he exclaimed, with stars dancing in his eyes.

As Sakura reached the piece, Luffy began rolling his right arm. Then threw back the limb, frowning to concentrate, Luffy stretched his arm just right, "Gum-gum..." and let loose. "Grab!"

Shooting his arm straight on target, the Rubber-man snagged both his precious seat and the kunoichi straining to drag it.

"Ha! Got it!" Luffy declared, pausing to frown with greater care, he began reeling both in with surprising care. After moments, he was holding the wooden sheep's-head at his shoulder height, with Sakura hanging from its ear, careless for the weight of both under his monstrous strength.

"Whoa! Your rubber powers are so cool, Captain! Please, let me ride like that next time! Believe it!" Naruto pleaded with the careless captain. Until a pair of hands interposed between them.

"Let's save that for another time, Naruto," Nami interjected, then stepping up to help Sakura back aboard and facing Luffy with her head bowed with care. "First," she spoke, with one open palm-that slapped Luffy, hard. Sending his rubber head towards the open air some 7 meters!

"Why did you break our ship in the first place, Luffy!? That caused me to run out here without getting dressed and let Sanji and Ussop get a peek at my panties!"

Halfway across the world, a certain wondering soul blew a sneeze through his nose. Or he would, if he had a nose at all! **[1]**

"Well, I was training, Nami," Luffy replied, his head sto;; bobbling back and forth. "Zoro and I were sparring when one of my Gum-gum: rifles missed him and hit the ship on accident. I'd never break the Merry on purpose."

Walking over to the prow, Luffy placed his load down easily, while Kakashi came over to stand beside him.

"That looks like it went a little far for a training session, Captain. Aside from wrecking this boat, Zoro shouldn't really be doing anything for another day to let his wounds heal properly," the ninja lazily advised.

"Also, where did the sudden idea to train come from?" he inquired, hoping it wouldn't mean additional work for his plans for the day to come.

Luffy didn't answer for a moment, before meeting his eyes, and Nami's beside them.

"Because, Old Man Kakashi. Some of my nakama got hurt. Back when we fought against bastard-Krieg and Arlong. I didn't do enough and Naruto, Nami, Zoro and Ussop got hurt because of it."

A glare was creeping over Luffy's face while raising one hand to rest it on his treasure and looking across the others aboard.

"I meant what I said inside that hospital," he declared. "I promised Shanks that I would return this hat to him one day, after finding the One Piece. But I can't do that without my friends with me, otherwise it won't be worth being the King of the Pirates. Naruto got poisoned trying to save my life, Ussop and Zoro were hurt when I wasn't around, and I can't just take that and do nothing."

"That's why I destroyed bastard-Krieg and stopped Arlong from hurting Sanji, but more is out there."

Reaching to grasp his bicep, Luffy's face remained unchanged with the active pose he set.

"I've got to be really ready for the Grand Line. Enemies just as bad as them will come to meet us there. So training is how I can get strong enough to be a captain who can get his crew through anything, and not lose any of them!"

To those who knew him, none made a sound. The weight behind his words, with shame clear in his dark eyes, it stopped Nami, Ussop and his first mate in their tracks.

'Luffy...' Nami blinked towards her captain. While Ussop nearly dropped his hammer, Zoro's eyes were the widest of all, and Gin felt

his respect for Luffy rise even higher.

Sanji, nodded, after shaking some water out of his hair.

"I see. Not a bad idea, captain. In the meantime, I'll start on breakfast." He promised, moving back inside the kitchen.

"Hey, Sanji-senpai! Let's make up some Ramen to eat!" a fellow blonde demanded while following the cook inside the kitchen.

"No, we're not having Ramen for breakfast, kid!" a shout came from inside, while the others outdoors were still gawking towards Luffy in amazement.

Nami herself was almost sure it was still a dream. 'Did Luffy actually just talk about preparation, like he had a plan for something?'

"I see," Kakashi spoke up. "You know, there are other things to do than just sparring if you want to improve, Captain Luffy. Why not try some exercises that you did before leaving to become a pirate."

At that suggestion, Luffy only turned and blinked. "Other stuff? What do ya mean, Old Man Kakashi. That is how I trained all the time as a kid. Shishishishishishishshi, I even broke at least 9 different houses before to learn how to use my Gum-gum powers. So, a small dent like this isn't so bad."

The boy declared with a smile of pride.

"This is a ship, you can't just break it, idiot!"

"If you did that here, then we'd be stuck out here stranded on the water!"

Nami and Ussop admonished him, together. With a huff, one of them turned back to fixing the Merry, while the other grabbed Sakura's hand to move back inside and get changed.

Another 30 minutes passed before everyone got the makeshift repairs done on the ship, helped along by Kakashi and Sasuke.

'Never thought any skills from a D-rank mission might actually become handy at all, except to enjoy a good book,' the grey-haired man reflected.

After they were finished, Sanji announced breakfast was ready. Everyone poured into the kitchen, leaving a few spare Naruto's to man the ship.

Kakashi, Sasuke and Ussop occupied one side of the table, eating omelettes with a few different contents, especially Sasuke's tomato overload. While Sanji waited hand-and-foot on Nami and Sakura, with Zoro and Gin shoulder-to-shoulder, and Luffy at the head, wolfing down an extra serving, then reached back for more.

"Ow! Owowowowow-hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot!"

The captain cried in discomfort, waving a burning hand in the air.

"Well, what do you expect, rubber-man! Try to grab food from my skillet again and I'll kick you out of the kitchen!" Sanji berated the whining Luffy.

"But I'm hungry! And you keep on giving Nami and Sakura all the rest!" the straw hat shot back.

"That's because Sakura and Nami are ladies! The absolute beauties I was put on this earth to serve above all else! Today especially to give thanks for that amazing sight from Nami-swan this morning," the pervy cook replied, folding two hands to his cheek with hearts in his eyes.

Until Nami herself smacked him out the door. "I'm charging you just the same, 100,00 bellies plus 500% interest!" she declared, before walking back to sit with the others.

Naruto, standing near the kitchen space, gulped down his fears before reaching back to the meal and speaking with Luffy.

"Captain! It's Sanji-senpai's rule that girls get to eat first. Believe it! That's how things go back at the Baratie too!" Sakura and Nami thanked them, in their own way.

"Thank you, Naruto. I would like a little more fruit if you have any," a pinkette replied, politely.

"Ohhh, Naruto? I'd love a tangerine smoothie right now," Nami's musical voice beset the knucklehead. Sanji arrived back inside the kitchen just as Naruto fulfilled Sakura's request, and quickly had Nami's smoothie ready within moments.

All the rest of the men could only pity the pair, 'I'd feel sorry for the guy if he wasn't such a total perv.,' Ussop expressed. 'Let's hope Naruto doesn't end up that hopeless.'

Until a crash of plates from the sink stopped everyone.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" Naruto's voice rang through the room. The boy was running to his backpack, pulling out a trio of picture frames.

"Sakura-chan! Sasuke! Kakashi-sensei! Here!" Coming to each of them, Naruto handed the copies to his teammates, of the photos back at the Baratie.

"Before we left to chase after Nami, the cooks wanted to get a goodbye photo together, for us to remember them by. You guys weren't there, but I made sure you were in the pictures! Believe it!"

Sure enough, each member of Team 7 was found in the frames. The other three were surprised, with Kakashi examining his carefully.

"So... I imagine you used shadow clones and different transformations to place us in these photos Naruto?"

"Yeah. Pretty good idea, ya know, sensei," the orange, unpredictable, maelstrom described. While Sakura frowned at her copy, and Sasuke was brooding. Beside him, Zoro was staring at the picture while Ussop had a hand to his mouth, laughing.

"Naruto. Why is my copy holding up a "Lame" sign to his forehead in this picture?" the Uchiha questioned him, his brow furling deeper than usual.

"Cause it looked better, Sasuke," Naruto threw back at his academy rival. "Come on, it's not like I made you smile or something. Nobody would think it's the real you at all if I did. And Patty used to say you are a bit lame and broody all the time, believe it," the boy threw back with a pout.

Most of the crew leaned back, waiting to hear Sasuke's reaction. While glaring at his teammate, Sasuke's tight lips had enough pressure to produce a diamond; taking the urge to throw Naruto out a window and forcing it beneath his own shame from their fight against Chew.

Sakura was doing the same, still recalling her promise to Kakashi about hurting Naruto in any way, form or shape.

A sharp clap broke the tension, as Kakashi rose to his feet.

"Naruto, these pictures are thoughtful and should be appreciated for the memories of our time there. Although, I do believe Chef Zeff is the most amusing one in this memento, especially with that glare while you are on his shoulders."

Looking back to their copies, Sasuke and Sakura each nodded, while Kakashi took note of how the trio each dropped their passive-aggressive moods.

'Well, now is as good a time as any. I finished those plans this morning, and Zoro will likely start his own with us, too.'

"Naruto."

"Yeah, what is it, Kakashi-sensei?"

Looking his student over carefully, Kakashi raised one hand to rub over his wild blonde hair.

"How does your head feel, after getting smacked between Zoro and Sanji the other night? And does it feel like the antidote to the NH5 poison you inhaled from Krieg has run its course?"

Naruto glared at the two at fault, with Nami joining in. Both perpetrators had enough sense to be quiet and accept the looks without complaints.

"Yeah, I'm actually better than I ever have in the last week, sensei!"

Glancing at his jinchuuriki student, Kakashi fixed him with a careful stare that set the boy on his nerves, before glancing at his stomach.

'It's been over a month since he first drew on the Kyuubi's power at Tazuna's bridge. I'll discuss it with him on the night shift tonight. But otherwise, it seems Naruto's prisoner has accelerated his recovery from that poison gas completely. He was close to mastering water-walking the day before Don Krieg arrived and we made a rapid departure from the Baratie, so a little extra practice should be the push to mastering it. That said, it's time for some bitter work to start.

"Sakura, Sasuke! After leaving the table, pack each of your photos away with your own possessions. It's time to resume your training."

Resuming his role as a Jonin-sensei, each of the Genin began to jerk in surprise, then grew serious at this news, and the magnitude of focus in their teacher's eye.

"I'm going to increase your workload by a serious measure. Despite that victory in Cocoyoshi village, the dangers we encountered could be gauged as between B-rank to A-rank. According to what Chef Zeff

described, and some additional knowledge I gained from Johnny and Yosaku, dangers of a similar scale, or even greater lie ahead on the Grand Line and elsewhere in the world."

The Jonin himself stood tall, glaring down at his students, "Particularly that swordsman who defeated Zoro, Mihawk. And other pirates at or higher than Arlong's league. We were able to handle Zabuza together, but during recent incidents, the four of us were separated to face dangers you three are unqualified to face at your current levels."

"I cannot guarantee a similar case won't happen again," he continued, in a sorrowful tone.

"Instead, I want to ensure each of you can protect one another and survive against any kind of threat we find."

"I'm going to up my own training as well, so prepare for a lot of sweat, strain, and discomfort. Because everything we did at the Baratie and more... is about to get much, much harder."

Each of the Genin coiled in their seats at their teacher's promise, while the other Straw Hats had different reactions. Some reflected on themselves, others worried about what kind of pain Kakashi had in mind for the children around them. While two were looking at a pair of boys they had been training with lately.

Still, Kakashi was smiling at the three one moment later.

"Plus, we'll also be learning some new jutsu and different skills, as well. Particularly after something I learned from Zoro and Sanji just the other night.

At this news. Naruto was grinning, deeply excited to grow stronger and to learn more jutsu. While another two people turned to face the floor, their thoughts on the recent past.

Sasuke's hands curled into fists, recalling the events between himself and Naruto

"Fire-style" Great Fireball jutsu!"... "Sasuke! That the hell was that. You could'a burned me down there, and my clones already had everything handled! Come on, that really being a bad teammate!"... joined with an image of Naruto cut to pieces by Chew, the latter shouting "Those flames of yours hurt a lot. But they weakened the ground around me enough to pull myself out of that hole."

Shame was burning through his mind, compelling the Uchiha to become sharper, more than stronger. While the sole kunoichi took a more balanced perspective.

'I... I barely did anything. And I had to be saved by others more and more,' the pinkette acknowledged. 'Maybe training like this will be a good idea. I am a smart girl, and did some good thinking to keep the Cocoyoshi villagers safe, Sensei praised me while we were chasing Miss. Nami and I got to help her, Ussop-san, Zoro-san and Captain Luffy with their injuries. I'm still useful, but maybe a little more training would go further to stop them from getting hurt, like what Captain was talking about earlier.'

"Hey, hey, hey, hey! Old Man Kakashi!" Luffy crashed into his thoughts.

"If you're gonna be training with them, then I'll join in too! It'll be fun! SHishishishishishishi!"

"Hmmm," Zoro grunted at the news, before grasping his sword in one hand.

"Might be a good idea to make sure that accident this morning doesn't come again. I'll join in too, if you don't have an issue, Kakashi. Maybe we'll even have another spar together."

The first mate shot the ninja an eager grin; the success of Kakashi's advice in his fight with Hatchi was deep in the swordsman's

consciousness.

The instructor met both the captain's and first mate's faces with a pondering eye; weighing the benefits, downsides and extra work their demands might bring.

"I suppose we should be training together, if we are going to be travelling until Sasuke, Naruto, Sakura and I find our way back home," he resigned with a shrug.

"Scuse me, Kakashi?" Gin's voice came into the group.

"Hmmm?"

"One moment ago. Ya mentioned 'A-rank' an' 'B-rank' categories; then new techniques, callin' 'em 'jitsu.' What're those, if ya don't mind me askin'," the former brigand inquired.

Each of the ninjas looked over at him before Ussop and Nami joined in.

"Actually, I'm wondering that too," the sniper confessed. "Are these letters some kind of label or system that you follow to gauge different dangers?"

"Yeah, what do those things mean, Kakashi? Plus, if you guys start training here on the deck, will similar terms come up again? Oh-"

After his question, Ussop shot from his seat, planting one foot on the table and forcing a hand into Kakashi's face.

"Don't you dare do anything to break the Merry at all! And keep Luffy from doing the same again today, or any other time!"

Pushing the finger aside, Kakashi tried to answer before Zoro pushed the long-nose pirate to the ground, gently.

"Tone it down, Ussop. I'm sure all of us agree. Actually, Kakashi?" the swordsman turned over to the Jonin. "If Nami's right, then how

would I rank up based on that system if it does address someone's threat level?"

"OHHHHH! That's right, you guys don't know anything, ya know!" Naruto declared. While Sakura herself took on a pondering posture.

"Hmmm. We never really have spoken about the different ranks, or classes that shinobi follow since we got here. Even at the restaurant, Chef Zeff and Sanji only learned about how our ninja arts work from chakra."

"Alright, alright!" Kakashi cut between them, arms raised to settle the entire group.

"There is a lot I want to cover today with my students, and only so many hours of daylight to use. I'll give you all a basic description, then the work will begin, alright!"

Luffy himself stood from the table and walked over to the doorway.

"Nah. That stuff sounds boring. Let's get started fast. The rest can wait 'till dinner. I'm gonna go stretch."

Closing the door, the rubber man left his crew befuddled. Many simply couldn't wrap around how whimsical their captain could be, while Kakashi blinked at an opportunity.

"Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura!"

Now used to when their sensei got serious, the Genin were ready in mere moments.

"Follow Luffy and begin a few standard warm-ups. The same we did at the Baratie, but stay within a comfort zone, for now. I will answer Ussop, Nami, Gin and Zoro, and then we'll start the real work. Go!"

Each of the pre-teens dashed outdoors, while Kakashi himself faced the rest of the Straw Hat crew.

"First, Nami. You are correct about A-rank and B-rank serving to classify different components within the shinobi system. I'll give a summary of the basics and a few extra topics that my students will likely talk about. Everything else will wait until tonight, then the training begins.

15 minutes later, everyone was on deck, with one eager blonde, one temperate pinkette and one fixated ravenette standing at attention.

Zoro was in a separate corner meditating, while Nami lounged in a deck chair, Ussop and Gin stood ready with the sails, and Luffy was working on his aim.

"Gum-gum: rifle!" From the deck, the Rubber-man left another long punch fire out to the water. Nearly 3 dozen Naruto's stood some 30 meters out, spread throughout the waves. Kakashi had asked for the shadow clones to allow Luffy to improve his aim; the Straw Hat having cut the original 4 dozen to their current numbers. At first, a long-range Gum-Gum: Gatling barely hit any, so the Captain followed his instincts and took a few more moments before letting loose.

Back on deck, Kakashi began an explanation to his students.

"Now," Kakashi began. "Each of you have improved immensely from our A-rank mission against Zabuza and Haku. However, more dangers are around the corner, and our goal is not to defeat every enemy we find; but to sur-"

"WHhaaat!"

Kakashi could not suppress the groan at Naruto's cry.

"Sensei, you've gotta be getting it wrong. By defeating everyone we find, we've been helping people left and right since getting here. And it's gotten us a lot of help along the way from different people. Like Tarm, Chef Zeff, Cocoyoshi Village and more! Believe it!"

His teammates blinked, before pondering the "dead-lasts" perspective somewhat, but their sensei disagreed.

"That's true Naruto. But such cases will be the exception now, not the rule!" Kakashi ordered, brokering no complaints. "Such incidents did happen, yes. However, in each case, we had our own reasons to do so, and it was only by chance for them to match up with the goals of others. There is a real chance we will encounter more dangers in the future. Our goals will be only to survive."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't give aid when it is necessary but standing our ground in every fight will only give adversaries more chances to kill us," the Jonin explained, professional and detached.

"We aren't on any official mission, and our goal is to make it back to Konohagakure. We have to stay alive long enough to do that. And that entails survival as our goal, not victory in every battle that we find. Understood?"

Two-thirds of those before him nodded, while the stubborn one gave a pout.

"Sensei, wouldn't beating everyone we meet mean we survive just as much? After all-!"

"Naruto!" a sharp, commanding tone came from his teacher. Kakashi thought for a moment, before choosing a different concept.

"How about this. If you stand your ground and die right here, then you won't be able to become Hokage at all if another person kills you. If you back off from one fight to keep yourself and your comrades alive, that is how you can succeed in that goal. Do you understand?"

Immediately, Naruto's mind turned about on a dime. "Oh! Okay, yeah I get it now, sensei. Survive instead of solving every problem I find. Okay!"

With that complaint covered, Kakashi resumed his original point.

"Now, each of you have different skills, and I understand now that you have your own style of learning; or one method of it that works better than others do. Each of you also have distinct individual talents that set each apart from one another, and certain shortcomings that can be dangerous weaknesses."

His students each glared at such a suggestion, but it wasn't anything Kakashi hadn't already expected.

'I wish I had a stronger idea of how these learning styles work. I know they are present, but tailoring the best way to approach them might take more time.'

"Each day," the sensei continued, "we will go through different physical exercises, but at a far higher intensity than before. I need all of you strong and ready, with no room for slacking off. Next, improving your reactions to danger and defensive skills will be paramount. That will be followed by refining your current jutsu skills, learning new ones, and finally one-on-one training with me or sparring matches."

Naruto and Sasuke shared a grin, eager to grow in this new intensive training. While Sakura gulped in clear discomfort.

"To that end, survival is once again, our goal. So, ensuring your ability to see and avoid danger is paramount." With Kakashi's words, a harder mood came slipping to his words.

The Genin could only blink-

-until three kunai cut by their heads, each one taking hairs with them.

"Why?" Kakashi's demanding tone attacked them. Beneath the bright, scorching sunshine most of Team 7 felt a chill through their nerves. The other Straw Hats rose with outrage until a certain look silenced each within seconds.

"Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura! All your attention was focused on me, and none of you saw the kunai until after they had struck. Were those aimed at your throats, death would be all you found, and none had survived."

"All of you need to learn to recognize, evade and avoid dangers immediately!" Kakashi ordered them, adopting the same persona that set Zabuza Momochi shaking in his shoes.

"Our first stage of training today is about evasion! Either to avoid any and every attack that comes, whether up-close, medium or from long-range. Use the substitution jutsu if you nearly get hit or dodge the rest of the time. Your goal... *is to stay unhurt.*"

Sasuke threw himself sideways, rolling over the water to avoid the shuriken and kunai flying off the deck of the Merry. He rose in a crouch as one leg, impossibly long, sliced through the surface of the ocean and nearly hit Sakura.

The kunoichi herself jumped aside, scrambling to watch her footing on the choppy waves surrounding them as the slightest shift would cause her to slip for a swim. Sasuke found himself weaving around more shadow-kunai-and felt a solid rubber sledgehammer nail his head!

"Owww!" Sasuke exclaimed, the hit causing him to lose any grip on the waves and slide in the water. Sakura cried out in worry, running to help just as the Uchiha caught a grip on the surface. Accepting her help, Sasuke was above the water yet his shorts were soaked through,

"Hey Old-man Kakashi! I hit Sasuke in the head!" Looking over towards them, one of the clones nodded with approval.

"Good work taking that opening, Captain. And Sasuke!" the clone shouted, raising a hand to his mouth.

"Remember, no Sharingans at all. Otherwise, there'll be no training later to develop new ninjutsu."

The Uchiha growled back at his sensei, not aimed at the teacher, but at the conditions he could not argue against. He and Sakura stood a few hundred meters from the Going Merry. Kakashi had decided to mix everyone's training together by having Luffy practice his attacks by throwing them at the Genin from several meters away, refining the aim and extension of his moves away from the ship. Ussop had been invited to practice his aim by sniping at the Genin with his slingshot, with two Kakashi shadow-clones providing a close watch and more dangers without wasting real ninja tools lost in the surf.

Both Genin were tired, the constant use of water-walking draining their chakra slowly; something a single clone on deck kept careful watch of via his own sharingan. Sasuke especially had been forbidden to use his own to conserve chakra for more training later in the day. While Naruto was still on deck locked in a sparring match with their sensei.

'I thought he'd help me with more sharingan-practice. But I guess-'
"OWWWW!" Sasuke's thoughts were silenced by a solid lead ball to his chest.

"Ha~ha~ha~. ~Good thing that's not the ex~plo~ding~ones~" Ussop sang out to them, drawing back his slingshot with another lead star.

The pirates themselves had even begun to work Luffy's more broad attacks and Ussop's precision together in combinations; the former to set up the targets for a shot, or the latter blocking one angle to move in while Luffy hit them clean-on.

Sakura stood near her teammate, watching closely for the next attacks to come and picking up patterns in the training drill.

'Right now, Kakashi-sensei should give us a moment to recover as his clones evaluate everyone's moves, while Captain Luffy will throw

a rifle or battle-axe, and Ussop's attack might follow. Or the other two will switch places, and Luffy's attack might be easier to evade.'

'I can't believe I got this soaked from falling in or getting splashed,' she continued, running a hand through her wet clothing. 'But I'll never take my clothes off like Luffy said we should! I just need to get my own swimsuit somewhere soon,' the girl promised herself.

The knuckle-head captain had talked about them stripping down to undies while on the water to keep their things dry; with little thought of discomfort or, other details. Still, Nami whacked him upside the head and Kakashi point-blank refused it too.

"Gum-gum: Whip!"

Both the genin heard Luffy coming, Sasuke preparing to jump until Sakura whispered to his ear. Glancing down, he nodded and both sunk underwater, swimming together to their right before grasping the surface and vaulting back above; the momentum making it easier to dodge the kunai and shots that followed.

Sakura's prediction was right on the mark. Both of the Genin were growing better; while their teammate on board had his own struggles.

Naruto was trying to weave and duck under his sensei, but a knee to his chest sent him tumbling back, still too slow.

"Hhhhhhh," his instructor sighed.

"Naruto. I know this is very much against your instincts, and you're efforts are certainly there. However, the results are not enough to keep you alive. That hesitancy spent fighting with the drive to hit me is what causes you to get hit."

They had been at it for nearly half an hour; Naruto was given strict orders to only evade Kakashi's taijutsu hits, not fight back. The

instructions were absolute but did not change the boy's hesitancy at all.

"Sensei. This is backwards to everything I did at the Academy! Believe it! Fighting back is what I do, no matter who or what does something to me! Ya know!" the boy complained again, rubbing the bruise on his chest for a moment.

The Jonin himself reflected on that, and Naruto's choices during the bell test and their first hostile encounter with pirates in Hanma Village. Pondering that for a moment, he sighed in resignation.

'I'm sorry Iruka.'

"Naruto! In any of those cases, did you win? Running in to throw the first hit or throwing more and more into it? Did you have success in any of them, especially at the Academy?"

"GGGGGGRRRRRRRRRRRRRRrrrrrrrr!" the boy's frustration was easy to see, and Kakashi took it as a no.

"That is because you were not instructed properly. The teachers at the Academy, if they saw you doing that but said nothing about it or suggested another way to fight someone, were in the wrong. Then they failed you as the teachers."

The words stopped Naruto colder than ice. His building frustration was doused completely.

Kakashi himself continued. "It is the ugly truth, but the problems you have and your struggles at the Ninja Academy rest with the instructors. If a teacher sees one of their charges with a bad habit and does nothing to fix them, then they fail as a teacher." The Jonin even smiled in shame at the shimmer of his own reflections, catching himself sharing and applying the same revelations to the present.

"I know about what happened between you and Mizuki. I also know that you respect Iruka; however, he is not a perfect teacher and also

fell short of helping you prepare to succeed instead of only giving words and suggestions."

"You are my student now, and it is time to make you a much better fighter than before."

Naruto could barely stand, blinking with awe at someone suggesting he was not at fault for his Academy performance.

'Kakashi....sensei....'

"I...hu-hu-hu!" the boy forced a laugh through a lump in his throat.

"I never did win a spar at the Academy with anyone, Sensei. I guess I didn't really ask myself that before, ya know. So, what do you think I should do instead?"

"First," the Jonin continued. "If one option does not work, then looking for a separate way to reach the same goal is a good choice to make. You want to hit back at me, I understand that. But, the goal here is still to survive and avoid being hit. Don't look right at my hits but look around them to find an open space to move into. Let's try this different way and see if you can last longer sparring with me than you did against others at the Academy."

Taking a classic stance again, Naruto nodded before bracing himself. Kakashi threw a combination out with a minor degree of speed, with Naruto's eyes darting around before shifting to his right, ducking under a kick and pushing back with his legs to avoid punches.

Kakashi did the same thing, and Naruto dodged them again. Before a different combination came and the boy came close to getting hit, he managed to find distance just in time. The sensei chose to throw several kicks next and grew surprised as Naruto ran forward to roll between his legs to escape them.

'Hmmmmmm. He's getting creative.'

Kakashi pivoted on the spot, keeping his balance perfectly as another knee came forward to Naruto's bewilderment. Following instincts, the orange Genin threw his arms out to deflect the hit aside, then began hopping back to a safer distance, breathing heavily.

Kakashi fixed him with a look, then nodded with approval. A grin stretching ear-to-ear lit up Naruto's face, before growing determined and preparing for the next set.

Their spar continued, until Kakashi began boxing Naruto into a corner of the deck, and the boy had to improvise.

"Hhhh?"

"Shadow-clone jutsu!" A spare clone appeared behind Kakashi, who frowned as he pressed on. Naruto ducked around a combination of jabs, one knee until an open palm lightly pushed him back, to get nailed with a side-kick.

Yet, the figure Kakashi hit immediately dissolved into smoke.

"Phew, that was a close one, sensei." At the call, Kakashi's head shot to his right, where Naruto was standing near Gin and Zoro as the pair were cleaning their weapons.

"Naruto! What was that, kid?" the former Krieg officer questioned him.

"Huh?... uh... well...." the boy scratched the back of his head, clueless to explain what he'd improvised. Still, Kakashi pieced everything together, to his own surprise.

"A shadow-clone jutsu mixed with the substitution jutsu," the Jonin surmised, calling over to them.

"It's also called a body-switch technique. It's a rapid move, where a ninja exchanges their position with another object around them. It

moves them away from danger at the last second."

Finishing his explanation, Kakashi's mind continued to spin, forming a new concept with enough potential to leave his conscious staggering.

'I was watching his hands closely, and with Naruto's chakra control, he is months or years away from using that jutsu without hand signs. However, I wasn't watching his clone and expected it to try and attack my blind spot. Instead...the clone must have used the substitution, moving the original out of danger to let itself be destroyed.'

"Naruto!" Taking a far more serious tone, the Jonin-sensei brought a pause to their spar to interrogate his student.

"Did you intentionally create that clone to substitute you away from my attack? A move like that truly is brilliant, if that is the case that occurred moments ago."

"Uhhh, Yeah! Of course, I did, sensei!" the blonde replied, with a thumbs up far too innocent to be honest. "I'm just the kinda ninja to think it up and keep something ready when I need it, thinking more moves ahead of you and all that stuff. Believe it. Ha hahahaha!"

At this point, Zoro fixed the back of his head with a scowl, while Kakashi kept his eye straight, and Nami palmed her face.

'Keep talkin', kid. All you'd need is face-paint with 'lia' written on your forehead.' Gin thought with pity.

"So, you improvised under pressure and pulled that right out of your head," Kakashi surmised, moving back to business.

"Naruto. That was true brilliance. Now," the Jonin cast a look out from the ship, pointing towards Sakura and Sasuke.

"I have a few ideas on how that trick could be refined to a very potent skill. Please, make around 20 shadow clones and position them to watch Sasuke and Sakura!"

"Uhh.....ok, sensei! Shadow-clone jutsu!" In a moment, the deck of the Going Merry was filled with that precise number of Naruto's, with Kakashi taking count.

"Alright. Let's discuss some formations we can use for the clones."

Taking the blonde aside, a minute later he had a stack of paper and pencils from inside the Lounge.

Sakura herself let out a yelp, at several shadow-kunai tearing through the water in front of her, driving the in-training ninja to shuffle backwards. Her footing was clumsy but sufficient. She shook her head before she found herself back on the deck of the Merry.

"Huh?"-

"What! How did a copy-Naruto get out there, then turn into smoke?" Luffy asked, his left arm retracting back with a snap.

"Oh, Sasuke!"

Turning at the shout, Sakura watched as a clone of Naruto became replaced with her crush out on the water.

Blinking at the move, she pieced together what happened, while Sasuke took a glance at the clones around them. Looking out to see another one out on the water, he recalled the same trick saving Naruto from Chew during their fight.

Even the last Uchiha couldn't stop giving a nod at the principal. Then took a closer glance at the Kakashi clones around them, their sharingans uncovered.

"What, Kakashi! Your sharingan, how can this be trained if....." his accusation died off, as the clone gave a nod.

"Huh? Sensei, if your clones have their sharingan out, how are you missing us out there?" Sakura questioned him.

"These eyes aren't to make everything hit the pair of you," one clone reassured. "It's to watch where you are in case a threat interrupts our training and to track your chakra pools to ensure we do not have a case of chakra exhaustion to cripple anyone for the remainder of the day."

He gave them a moment to consider the point, then started shooing the pair and the orange-clad clones out to a further distance.

Elsewhere on deck, Gin spun his remaining tonfa through an easy set of moves.

"Hey, y' ready now, Zoro?"

Across the deck, the swordsman nodded as he held his one remaining sword in a classic middle-guard. Dashing forwards, the first-mate set a basic kata to start their spar. Gin replied with deflection moves, connecting the metal ball at the end of his weapon to the blade, while keeping one open palm at his chest for balance and focus.

Zoro pressed on with over-head cuts followed by a cross-slash. Each was parried before Gin ducked below and came with an uppercut to his jaw.

The swordsman leaned to avoid it, stepping back to regain enough distance to use his blade and prevent the shorter weapon's benefits inside close range. Gin did the same, cursing.

'If Ah had both of'em, AH could ah grappled with Zoro. And Ah'd rathah not pistol-whip th' first-mate. I ain't got a definitive rank hereabouts, so riskin' that's a no-go.'

Zoro carried a frown deep with self-reflection.

'I'll need to get some new swords before we reach the Grand Line. Too bad none of those back in Arlong Park really suited me,'

'Still, I haven't used my Ittoryu techniques often enough to grow. I've been focusing on Santoryu too much, so this is a nice opportunity.'

Zoro kept his guard angled at Gin, lowering his blade and turning its edge aside, just above and parallel with his left leg, hips turned aside and well-balanced. Gin himself shifted, holding his tonfa's Monouchi[2] parallel with his forearm, both men taking defensive postures and waiting for the other to strike first.

Nami eyed the pair, before growing bored and turning to the morning paper. Sanji was waiting on her hand and foot, handling the rest of the sailing with her as the rest of the crew continued training.

Gin and Zoro remained patient until Zoro's lesser experience showed itself and he raised his blade to strike. Gin smirked, eyeing his partner's wrists. They spun right, angling the sword-edge to fall to the left, not straight on his crown. Gin followed accordingly, deflecting the blade around, yet didn't close in fast enough before Zoro drew back for a thrust.

Sakura and Sasuke continued their evasion training, with Ussop and Luffy growing more in sync and skilled alongside them. While Kakashi found a new headache by training to explain theory and concepts to Naruto step-by-step with words alone.

Another hour followed before the clones of Kakashi disappeared, their uncovered sharingans taking the last drops of chakra after using no additional jutsu the entire time. Kakashi himself nodded, taking in all the clones had seen then calling Sakura and Sasuke back to the deck.

Gin and Zoro each were battered, bruised and grinning at the other, while the Genin were tired and Ussop swung his arms left and right.

"Wow... I've never shot so many stars in such a short while. My arms actually hurt from holding my sling-shot at-ready so much."

"Thank you for your help, Ussop. And you too Captain," Kakashi nodded at the pair, with Luffy nodding, then strolled over to his seat and dropped down cross-legged.

"Alright, Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke. Each of you did well," he praised his students, to which two boys nodded, and the one girl could only slump, drained of chakra from such a long time and feeling every sore shot that did connect.

"We'll take a small physical break for now. I want to review your jutsu repertoires next, and then we'll begin more intense physical training."

Naruto went first, having shown two of the three he was capable of already. After transforming into every one of the crew, Kakashi sent him over the side with new instructions.

"Your chakra control for water-walking still needs a lot of work, if your clones reflect anything on the matter," recalling how several sent out to Sakura and Sasuke had dropped under the water.

With a nod, Naruto walked to the side as Sanji came out the door.

"Hey there, Naruto! If you see any fish down there, try and grab them and we'll have a few spare hors-d'oeuvres at dinner tonight!"

"You got it!" the boy cried, jumping over the side.

Kakashi only needed minutes to review every jutsu Sakura knew to perform, and moments to smack himself in the face.

'Am I truly that stupid?'

"Sensei? I... is something... wrong?" Sakura spoke to him. Turning to look at the girl, her face was clear with worry towards an obvious concept.

"No, you performed each of those jutsu flawlessly, Sakura," Kakashi explained. "A few memories of some dearly stupid decisions came to mind," he spoke, falling into more silent reflections.

'Only the 3 baseline E-Ranked jutsu. That is literally all she has, and I've taught her nothing else. Even to face A-rank situations back in Nami no Kuni, and the lightest training load after she completed the tree-climbing exercise so easily,' his thoughts a mixing of admonish awe. Before looking at his final student.

'Sasuke clearly has the broadest jutsu arsenal of the three. But I'd better give Sakura something to work on in the meantime, instead of repeating another mistake,' Kakashi decided.

"Alright, Sakura, you have each of those jutsu down very well; and your chakra control is better than Naruto and Sasuke's capacities combined," he praised her.

"Now, like Naruto I want you to work on something while I do the same with Sasuke. Watch my hands carefully," he instructed, forming them together, before dissolving before everyone's eyes.

"Huh!" Sakura gapped at the spot where her teacher disappeared. Sasuke activated his eyes and found the chakra outline of the man moving just behind the girl.

"Ninja Art: Transparency jutsu," a certain voice came from the railing, calling everyone's attention, even Luffy's from the prow.

"Whoa! You can turn invisible! Is that another mystery power!" he asked, shaking with excitement. Nami even dashed right in front of Kakashi, her hands folding up to beg, with eyes cuter than a needy Puppy.

"Please....please, Mr. Kakashi. Can you teach me that, and make sneaking around so much safer?" she begged him; with eyes gleaming for one thing only: money.

Kakashi tried to answer, but-

"Did someone **say, INVISIBLE!**"

Sanji burst right through a wall, leaving a clear imprint of himself behind and running straight to his knees before for Kakashi.

"Invisibility! Really?! As in nobody can see you, or only see right through you? You ninjas can really do that-and-and-and-and-grrr-and become transparent anywhere?!" he demanded, with lustful hearts in his eyes.

Naruto had come back to the deck to see what the noise was all about.

"Uhhhh. Yes," Kakashi replied. "The transparency jutsu was a simple one invented by a legendary ninja, Jiraya the Sannin. It's quite a useful skill, and Sakura does have the fine control to learn this one rather quickly."

" **PLEASE!**" Before anyone could react, Sanji tackled Kakashi, pinning him straight on the ground and begging with a face glowing bright red.

"My dream. It can happen, even without the Clear-clear Fruit! For years and years and years, I have wanted to experience invisibility for myself! I can see it clearly even now! I can do so much good with it, the power of-NUDE GIRLS!"

The building intensity of the crew.....came to a screeching halt.

"Ghkkkhh-No I meant invisibility! I can benefit all of humanity by protecting-NUDE GIRLS!-No, I mean mankind from the peeping-no problems that beset this earth-OF NAKED LADIES!"

Everyone flopped. Sanji kept speaking, but the truth was not covered anywhere.

"Shut up, Peeping Tom! We get it, you want to learn this transparency power to sneak in and spy on naked women! You degenerate pitiful idiot," Zoro declared to the cook.

"And Sanji, you're worse than Luffy! Stop putting holes in our ship!" Ussop admonished him while crouching behind a certain navigator.

"WHAT WAS THAT, YOU COWARDLY BOY AND MOSS-HEAD MORRON! THE ONLY THINGS YOU CARE ABOUT ARE YOUR SLINGSHOT AND SWORDS! YOU DON'T GET TO BE TALKING LIKE THAT TO A REAL MAN!" the cook bellowed from his dirty heart; his eyes still wide with glee.

"You PERVERT!" A scream shook the boat, as someone kicked Sanji's head from behind. Sending the Peeping Tom barreling towards Nami, who held two fists at her eye level.

Sakura joined in, and the beat-down that followed left even Sasuke pale with fear. Kakashi even backed away several steps, Gin and Ussop were too scared to move, and Zoro wisely did nothing.

Eventually, the girls stopped; both their fists smoking and cloaked in righteous womanly wrath.

Naruto especially was shivering in his shoes; 'Actually... it might be a bad idea to learn that and get more looks for my sexy-jutsu,' he silently decided.

"Naked girls, what's so special about that?" Luffy questioned. Causing a gong to drop on the deck, leaving Gin, Ussop and Kakashi bleached with dismay.

"Looking at them seems kinda dangerous and stupid. I'd use that mystery skill to steal meat, not to bother a girl taking a bath," the captain claimed, looking at Sanji's body with worry.

Some of the crew blinked, and in that moment the two female crewmates were at their captain's side. "Luffy, you are the best

captain ever!" Sakura proclaimed, hanging from his shoulders with a bear hug. Nami took his chin and guided it to face her, smiling.

"Keep thinking like that Luffy, and you will be an amazing catch for any girl to have," she promised, then looked away as a blush began growing on her face.

"Uhhhhhh....Naruto!" Kakashi called over to the boy. "Create 10 different shadow clones to stay here, then move back down for water-walking practice."

Eager for the distraction, Naruto followed orders and hopped back down, taking measured steps on the surface before going faster-and falling into the dip.

"Uhhhhhh... Sakura?" the pinkette turned to face her sensei. "Uh huh, Kakashi-sensei?"

The man swallowed his fears and dismay towards two particular people and got back to the training at hand.

'I'll write myself a note to never tell her, or anyone, how Lord Jiraya tested this jutsu, or why he invented it in the first place,' the former ANBU promised himself.

"The Transparency Jutsu can often be used to gather intel on a target or to steal certain goods and prepare for a larger operation. I actually used it in Arlong Park to sneak in and out undiscovered, along with stealing the Saw-blade that belonged to Arlong," he recounted.

"It would be a good tool to ambush people if you can master it, or to create distractions and move them away from your goal during a fight. Are you interested in learning it?"

To answer him, she stood at attention, ready and eager to add something new to her skill set.

"Yes, sensei!"

Smiling with his eyes, Kakashi showed her the hand signs again and described the mentality and chakra usage for the jutsu, then turned his attention over to Sasuke.

"Alright, Sasuke. Show me what you have, along with shuriken jutsu on the clones here at the deck, and the firepower that you can bring to this crew," he encouraged the boy. A few Naruto's complained but Kakashi silenced each of them. With a smirk, Sasuke followed his instructions easily, then displayed the Fireball jutsu for everyone on board to see.

Kakashi nodded, satisfied with the display; 'It's growing more powerful from his own development. Not quite near Obito's magnitude by the time he made Chunin, but the progress is coming steadily.'

"Alright. Now, it's time for physical training to start!"

"Zoro!" the jonin-sensei called over to the first mate.

"You and Sasuke have been training together well for some time. Would you mind continuing that while we travel with each of you?"

The green-haired swordsman nodded his reply. "Sure. Do you want Naruto and Sakura to join us too?" Kakashi pondered the question, glancing between his students and gauging the capacities each had shown thus far.

"I'd appreciate you working with Naruto, but I'm going to be focusing on Sakura for this stage," he replied. "I'm not sure if she could handle the kind of intensity your training regimen follows. Instead, I'm going to build her flexibility and a few utilitarian taijutsu measures."

With a shrug, Zoro agreed, moving out to grab his weights as Sasuke followed. Calling overboard towards Naruto, the blonde quickly followed them as Sakura's practice with her new jutsu was cut short by Kakashi.

2 full hours later, only Zoro, Naruto and Kakashi were standing. Sasuke was panting on his knees with every muscle in his arms and waist deeply worn down. Sakura was only held up by her hands, trying to find a comfy pose after Kakashi's full attention.

Unlike the boy's, she'd be forced through different taijutsu stances and katas with a level of detail finer than a senbon. After drilling her through each form, Kakashi decided to increase her flexibility, pushing the girl through several exercises to build heat in her muscles, then stretch them in ways and shapes at the edge of her comfort zone.

She was exhausted, lacking even the energy to say so.

Naruto himself was still doing push-ups, leaving Zoro very impressed.

Sanji, now conscious and able to walk, came outside with plates loaded with food, placing them on a small table near the tangerine trees.

"Alright! Come on up and chow down brats! You've really earned a good lunch today!"

Immediately, the Genin mustered their energy and shot for the food.

Kakashi chuckled at the sight but didn't follow just yet.

Luffy was running for the same thing until a powerful grip took his head. A body followed, pinning the captain and his near-bottomless stomach to the ground, far from the table.

"Hey! It's lunchtime, and I'm hungry! Somebody let me up before I starve!" he complained, wriggling to get free as Kakashi kept him solidly pinned.

"Good catch Kakashi," Nami complemented, stepping out from the door as Gin and Ussop finished patching up the imprint left by Sanji on the wall.

As everyone sat down, the Genin were inhaling their meals without a thought for how they looked; all of them, even Sakura, were just too hungry. Nami grabbed a tangerine on her way while Sanji moved back inside to cook more.

Kakashi joined him, having asked the chef to prepare a plate inside instead of bringing it out with the others.

"It's on the table for you Kakashi," the chef called over. With a nod, the Hatake took his meal and cast an eye on the door. As Sanji finished a chicken with orange sauce for Nami, he turned around to plate it; before realizing Kakashi hadn't left.

"What's up Kakashi? Something you dislike, because that meal still has to be eaten regardless."

With a jump, Kakashi's hand flew at his jawline, covering it as the plate fell to his knee, staying balanced perfectly, and a shuffle could be spied around his face.

"Oh, no," he replied, dropping the hand to show he was once again covered by a mask.

"It was delicious as it always has been, Sanji; thank you," he called back, one hand raised as he moved through the door.

With a blink, Sanji turned back to his job, with a flicker of curiosity at the man, his mask and what lay underneath it.

Back on deck, the Jonin cast his eyes over the Genin, noting how all of them were relaxing from the intense workload from the morning. The rest of the crew were there as well, while Zoro was out of the floor, slipping in for a nap.

'Well. Now that things have grown quiet, I can talk about the next stage of our training, and the revelation I found with Sanji and Zoro,' Kakashi decided.

"Alright, Sakura, Naruto, Sasuke? Now that all of us are here, there is a certain discovery that each of you needs to be aware of."

"Yeah-brugwhhhhat istgghcu itmmummmum Ka-" Naruto replied through a mouthful.

"Naruto!" Nami called at him, with a sharp flick to his forehead.
"Swallow first, then answer him. It's rude to talk like that, and nobody can make out what you want to share."

Naruto quickly followed her instructions, before apologizing to Nami and asking Kakashi, "What are you talking about Kakashi-sensei, and what's so important about it?"

"Well, I had a small altercation with Zoro and Sanji before we departed from Cocoyoshi Village," he continued, folding his arms while glaring at the pair. A pair of heads hung in regret, wise enough not to excuse the incident with Nami and Kakashi close by. While the rest of the crew perked up, curiously.

"After Naruto got hurt from saving Sakura from getting stuck in between their argument. I trapped each of them deeper in the forest, then tried to cast a genjutsu over each; the Death Mirage-jutsu."

Nami, Gin and Ussop each blinked at the name, their minds following a similar tune as the Jonin faced the trio with his single grey.

"Dearth-Mirage jutsu is a C-rank genjutsu. It can be easy to break out of or recognize, but shows what a person fears the most, causing a distraction fueled by their emotions to leave someone open for an easy kill."

"With no background on how they work, I induced each of them would be trapped in a nightmare with no way to escape from it."

Recognizing the terms now, Sanji and Zoro paled, the others nodded, while Luffy managed to hit 4 clones with one punch as Kakashi raised his headband, to display the Sharingan.

"However, the genjutsu failed to work at all, with Zoro and Sanji totally unphased. Following that, I examined them closely with this," he revealed, pointing to his eye.

"Some jutsu in our world are concentrated in a single limb or part of the body. This, a dojutsu, is called the Sharingan. It comes with a lot of special advantages, but one is to visually see the chakra pathways in another being," the Jonin described.

Sanji and Zoro nodded, recalling the nature of that eye from days ago, while the others took a moment to digest it.

'How many different powers can these ninjas have?' Nami questioned, silently.

"So cool! So, you have a mystery eye to see special things, huh?" Luffy cried towards them.

Most of the group sweat-dropped, having heard Kakashi's basic descriptions, while Sakura her voice.

"Kakashi-sensei! Did you mean they are immune to genjutsu!" she fearfully questioned.

"Maybe, Sakura," Sasuke answered her. Looking closer, their sensei found the other pair of Sharingans active, examining the other nakama carefully.

"Everyone here, even the Captain with his Devil-fruit powers. None of them have any chakra, let alone a chakra network within them at all."

Kakashi nodded, seeing half of Team 7 starting to catch on to such implications and piecing the mechanics behind Zoro and Sanji's immunity together.

"Why's that such a big deal? Does it just mean they can't learn ninjutsu like we do?" a knucklehead asked.

"That's only half of it, Naruto!" Sakura answered her teammate.

"Genjutsu works by using chakra as a medium to invoke those illusions in someone. That way-hhhhhmmmm!"

Her mouth was covered by a hand, but light enough to stop her lecture. Glancing up, Kakashi was standing between Sakura and Naruto.

"That may be the textbook explanation, Sakura. But, I don't think Naruto will grasp what you're talking about very well."

"Naruto? To work, a Genjutsu needs someone being targeted by it to have chakra in their bodies for it to work.[3] I'll give you more details later, but since nobody here, not even Arlong and his fishmen or the people in Cocoyoshi village have chakra at all, it means Genjutsu cannot touch them whatsoever."

Watching his student carefully, a surge of relief came through Kakashi as Naruto began to nod.

'Well, I did say they all have strengths and weaknesses. With Naruto, keeping things simple is his strong-suit.'

"Oh the other hand," Kakashi continued, "it also means that none of the pirates can learn any chakra techniques either. Like how to walk on water... or for Sanji to learn the transparency jutsu."

The impact of those words left the cook whiter than a cloud, petrified at the loss. Sinking to the ground, he began rolling about the deck in total loss. Gin was fighting the urge to snap his fingers, thinking only

'Goss, damnit.' Nami began cheering at the news, her arms high and voice loud with glee.

"Whooo! That's quite a big relief, Kakashi. Otherwise, Sakura and I'd have to watch out anytime we got changed or wanted a bath."

Sasuke was more curious than unbalanced, as illusions never had been his most eager tool-set. While Sanji and Zoro put a few pieces from that encounter with Kakashi together, and Luffy nodded along with Naruto at Kakashi's explanation.

Sakura was the most shaken, her mind imagining the worst.

'This means one entire third of all ninja arts are useless here, and we have only 2/3's to survive with. Kakashi-sensei defeated me so easily with the same genjutsu he used on Zoro and Sanji, so it must be a huge loss for us to not have that weapon at all.'

"Well, this is something of a benefit in any case," Kakashi announced to his students, and everyone else around.

"If they don't work, then teaching any of you to use genjutsu would be a redundant activity. Instead, your physical arts, taijutsu, ninja arts and team-forms are going to be the foremost of our training from now, until we return to the Elemental Nations. I will still develop each of your capacities to recognize and dispel any genjutsu, to prevent any complacency in that branch of combat."

"But otherwise, physical power, distractions, and ninjutsu will likely be our most dependable skills. Thankfully," the jonin sipped a touch of self-praise, "I am more than familiar with all the former."

"That is why I had each of you focusing on your physical skills throughout the morning. But now, we'll start something specialized towards ninjutsu."

At his announcement, the Jonin reached into his hip-pouch, pulling out a few thin squares of paper. Holding each in his hand, he thought

back to Konoha for a moment.

'Looking back, it's amazing that I had the presence of mind to keep that preliminary Jonin-sensei kit with me to Nami no Kuni. Otherwise, I'd be left with nothing to work with on things like this.'

"Chakra-litmus papers! Oh, you're going to find our element affinities, sensei?" Sakura asked him. Sasuke looked a little dejected, while Naruto could not be more confused.

"How are tiny bits of paper gonna help us learn ninjutsu? Come on sensei, why not just teach us a cool one right now, like that ice-move you did on Arlong!"

Sasuke couldn't help it and whacked his teammate on his head.

"Owww! Sasuke, what was that for? Paper isn't gonna help us learn anything cool and powerful!"

With a groan, Sasuke rolled his eyes at Naruto's answer. "That's exactly what it does do, you loser. It's a chakra litmus paper. That thing can test our chakra and..." Sasuke stopped his own description, thinking for a sec. about Naruto's very slow mind and the waste of breath trying to explain it like a book.

"Hhhh. Basically, it can tell someone what elemental jutsu will be the easiest ones to learn. Right, Kakashi?"

As his student asked, the Jonin sensei nodded, also noting the different looks the rest of the Straw Hat had towards him.

"That's correct Sasuke. Nami, Zoro, Ussop, Gin, Luffy? One form that ninjas can apply their power towards is called elemental jutsu," he began, while Sanji continued rolling in his own depression.

"Back in Nami's village, I actually used three different types of elemental jutsu during the course of the mission: Water-style, Earth-style, and a very special one called Ice-style. Some clans or entire

villages in the Elemental Nations often create their own unique elemental techniques, like Ice-style from Yukigakure. I actually learned that technique by stealing them from different people I was fighting years ago."

"However, others are very basic and commonplace to all shinobi, and are practised by everyone who becomes a ninja."

"OOOOOOO, so it's a mystery-power that lets you make your own weather!" Luffy cried with glee.

"Yeah, yeah, what's so big about all this boring talk, Kakashi-sensei. I thought you said you'd teach us more ninjutsu, not give a lecture that's a big waste of time," Narutop outed from his seat.

Kakashi's head nearly shot sideways at their reactions; while the others groaned in unison at the more childish crewmates.

"Ummmm. Maybe it'll work better if I show you something, instead of using long explanations," Kakashi decided. Standing up, he moved a few meters away, to give everyone a safe space.

"Watch me closely in how I use a jutsu," weaving together the signs for his own iconic jutsu, Kakashi grasped his arm as a familiar blue orb of pure energy gathered in his palm, focusing it to become easy for the mall to see.

"First, I channel the chakra through those three hand signs, and form it here in my right hand."

"Next, I change to nature of the chakra to a specific element; in this case like an electrical current." As he spoke, a crackle began forming in the chakra, a jolt of lighting could be seen surrounding it as the orb's colour began to shift into a brighter shade and a more solid form of power.

"So that's... an elemental jutsu like you were talking about, Kakashi-sensei?" Naruto's voice came to his teacher, with a mood of curiosity

and awe.

"Yes. For them, I can actually elevate this jutsu even further, by doing this!" The lightning energy in Kakashi's hand grew louder, filling every ear with the sound of a thousand chipping birds; lightning bolts were dancing wildly not across his arm but surrounding his entire body, with the strongest discharge still kept solidly in his hand.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey! Is-isn't that the jutsu you threatened Mihawk with after he beat Zoro, Kakashi?" Ussop asked him, shaking with excitement.

"Yes. This jutsu is called the Chidori, Ussop. It's actually one that I personally invented and a lightning-style jutsu at that.

Letting the technique dissipate, Kakashi raised his hand again, looking straight at his students.

"Okay, now listen very, veeeeeeeeery carefully, especially you Naruto," the man instructed with a detailed and slow pace.

"There are five basic types or natures of chakra. And every person in our homeland is born with the ability to use a single one easier than all the others. That one is called their natural affinity. There are Fire, Wind, Lightning, Earth, and Water. You got all that?"

Naruto frowned deeply, trying to make sense of it all before he nodded. "Yeah, I think I got it sensei."

"Okay then. Like Sauske described, that one element will be the easiest for somebody to learn, and in turn the most powerful element they can use, with enough training. To find that element, we used the slips of paper in front of you."

Finishing his lesson, Kakashi walked forward, taking one of the slips in his hand.

"I'll skip the explanation since you might find it boring. Right now, I'm sending a small amount of chakra into my hand so the paper can detect it and will react to the nature my chakra carries."

"If it turns to fire, then the person who used it has a fire-affinity. If it cuts in half, then it's wind. Earth will crumble it to dust. Water can leave it dripping wet. And lightning will make wrinkles form."

Everyone kept their eyes glued to the slip until it crinkled in his fingers.

"This means that I have a lightning-style affinity. And I later used it to invent a lightning-style jutsu, the Chidori. Still, I learned other natures after mastering this one, including water and earth. Now, Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto take a slip and hold it in your hands. Channel a little chakra into them, and we'll find out which types each of you have.

Naruto's hand moved faster than the others, while Sakura did the same, but Sasuke didn't move at all.

"I already know my natural affinity, Kakashi. Every one of the Uchiha clan holds a fire-style nature, and I've been training in fire-style jutsu for years, so let's start on a new technique while the others learn theirs," he suggested, rising to his feet and walking to the stern to find an open space.

"Actually, Sasuke, that might not be the case." Stopping in his tracks, Sasuke turned about-face to eye his sensei carefully. Yet, Kakashi did not wait for any questions or denials to come.

"It is true that the Uchiha often possess fire style and specialize in fire-jutsu; in fact, becoming quite famous for it. However, some shinobi are able to gain more than one natural affinity or have a primary one and a secondary one. It's usually a skill which ninja around Jonin-level accumulate, but there are exceptions."

Taking another slip from his pouch, Kakashi held it forward at his more prideful pupil.

"Sasuke, ever since our talk in Hanma village, I've kept a much closer eye on you, along with Sakura and Naruto. I have a suspicion that you and I may be very much alike, but I need to verify that theory. Please, let's test your natural affinity and see what happens."

Sasuke looked his gaze on the litmus-paper, before deciding he had nothing to lose and took it.

"A clan? What the heck does that mean?" Luffy's voice came from the table, holding a bowl of ramen in both hands.

"A clan? What the heck does that mean?" Luffy's voice came from the table, holding a bowl of ramen in both hands.

"NOOOO! THAT'S MY RAMEN, LUFFY!" Naruto's Holland in despair leaping straight for the glutton. Luffy barely noticed, until he swung around to leave Naruto tumbling across the floor and raising the delectable noodles to his mouth. The boy shook his head and made a dash for his beloved meal, only for Luffy to kick him overboard and swallow the last few drops.

"AAAAAHhhhhhhhhh That was good," the captain proclaimed, as an angry silhouette came up behind him.

"You Bastard!" Nami shouted, smacking the captain's rubber head hard enough to fly a few meters sideways.

"Sanji!" the navigator called down to the kitchen. "Luffy stole Naruto's Ramen for lunch. Cook him up a fresh bowl, please!"

"Right away Nami-swaaaaaannn!" a musical promise responded, while the girl walked over to the side to help the ramen-robbed Naruto. With a very special mood around him, a little comfort from a big-sister figure managed to move him from depression to a moderate pout.

"So, what is this Uchiwa-clan that Sasuke is a part of?" Luffy asked again.

"Luffy," Ussop answered the captain. "A clan is a group of people who are all extended family to each other, cousins, Grand-parents, great-uncles, 4th cousins, and more. All of them live together and often become real important if they have a big name that everybody knows about."

Turning back towards the ninja's, Ussop's face was honest and neutral.

"I bet Sasuke here is one of them, and those people became famous in their home-village for this fire-power chakra and a few other things. He's gotta have bucket-loads of family and all of them taught him how to use these powers as a kid. Must be why he's such a good fighter. Am I right?"

If an eclipse had come, bathing the daylight in pitch black, it would have carried a light tone than the mood radiating from Sasuke. The Uchiha's face only met the deck, drawing tighter by the moment to keep his emotions locked from showing.

Kakashi's eye was drawn in a line, glaring between his student and the sniper. Naruto's head and shaking between them both, any thoughts about his ramen totally thrown aside as memories of others talking about the Uchiha forced their way into his consciousness. Sakura's eyes had grown ultimately wide, but slowly morphed into a pensive expression.

'That's right, Ussop isn't from Konoha, so he doesn't know about Sasuke...'

"What's wrong? Why did everyone suddenly go all quiet and sad?" Luffy asked the four shinobi. Sasuke raised his head, but a hand fell on his shoulder, protectively.

Kakashi stepped forward.

"You are... correct, Ussop. Our village, Konoha, was actually founded by two prominent ninja clans forming an alliance together. The Senju clan, and the Uchiha clan; Sasuke's ancestors. They were one of the most power and prominent forces, and produced several shinobi' who's skill became legendary."

"Hold it!" Nami exclaimed, rising to her feet. "You just said 'was.' Did... something happen to-"

but her questioned died faster than an instantly eyes shooting wide as a memory clicked in her head.

' Back at the Baratie, "Your parents must be proud to have such a helpful hand when you're at home, Naruto," Nami praised him. She thought the complement would have brought happiness, not the gaunt eyes of depression and sorrow that met her. The boy, both Naruto and Sasuke looked away, shuffling off along the roof.'

" Naruto? Sasuke? You... do... you have any parents?" Nami pushed through the lump in her throat. She could recognize the loss in those eyes on anyone, best of all herself.'

' Neither boy responded for several moments, while Nami remained frozen in her seat. Until Sasuke responded. "My parents were stolen from me... by a murderer years ago."'

"Enough!" Kakashi ordered all of them. "The matter at-hand right now is our training. Tonight, if you want to know, we will tell you more. But not right now! Understood?"

His tone brokered no complaints or questions, even Sanji who'd arrived by then didn't rise an issue over what incident had come.

For Nami, everything else faded to a blank, leaving only Sasuke and Naruto remaining. Glancing down to the boy, recalling his own words towards lost family, the girl felt a powerful impulse. Wrapping one

arm around him, like her own sister often did to her, she brought Naruto back to a seat before aiming a very careful watch on Sasuke.

'I need to learn more about this, and soon.'

"Alright, now everyone, let's see what your affinities are," Kakashi announced. Luffy, Gin and Sanji moved over to Naruto, while Nami leaned closer to Sakura's slip and Zoro got to his feet to stand beside Sasuke, sensing this was a crucial point for each of them.

"Uhhh, sensei, I got it!" Sakura cried after a moment, holding up her piece, with water droplets slipping down her fingers.

"A Water-type, huh. I must say, given we're raveling on a ship, that element will go a very long way, Sakura. It's also a well-balanced and versatile one, and often takes quite a bit of intellect to use all of its benefits. Congratulations."

The kunoichi herself thought back to what she'd seen the Demon Mist-siblings and Zabuza doing during their first encounter with danger; then reflecting on how Kakashi copied their own techniques; 'Maybe he can teach those to me, and I'll grow to be a better kunoichi!' she found herself very excited.

"Hmmm. Hey, Kakashi," Zoro called over at the Jonin. His eyes were trained on the wrinkled paper in Sasuke's hand. "It looks like you were right, this paper looks the same as your did; so that means Sasuke here can use lightning?"

The Jonin nodded, "Yes, that is correct. You also saw the fire-style jutsu that Sasuke used earlier as well, form his own clan's heritage. It seems that he'll need to pour a lot more training into this since it would be a waste to leave one stagnant for the sake of the other. Sasuke himself has two developing elements, and both of them very offensive-orientated at that."

Meanwhile, the last Uchiha actually thought back to one of his few, closely kept family memories.

'When father first taught me the Great Fire-ball jutsu. It came out somewhat below-par. Still, this means it wasn't my primary natural affinity, and I still managed to train and advance it to a level that led him to complement me.'

'If I can go that far with only a secondary element, then this will be a huge step to growing even further than I ever did on my own,' he silently pledged.

"I got it!" Naruto shouted out, waving around four different strips of the litmus-paper.

"Hmmm, the paper cut itself apart, so according to what he said, that means you have wind-power, right?" Sanji induced.

"Hmmmmmmmm," Kakashi pondered in response, eyeing the jagged tares Naruto was waving around.

"Yes, that is true Sanji, but it goes a step even further," Kakashi's, voice became very serious towards them, walking straight up to Naruto.

"Often, a standard wind-type will only cut these papers in half. But Naruto's was nearly shredded to bits. This means he likely has a very powerful affinity, and one for wind-style even more."

The Jonin was frowning now, grappling with a notable dilemma. 'Wind-style is my weakest element, and the one I use in battle least of all.[4] Training Naruto in this might take some trial-and-error, but I can't wait until me get back to the village or go to Lord Third or Asuma for some help either.'

Silently, Kakashi started pondering over how to address this problem, while Sakura was gapping at Naruto's results.

"Hey, Naruto, you know... actually I'm going to take a guess that you don't," she amended herself. Something that pulled the blonde's attention away from their teacher.

"Know what, Sakura? Is it something important?" he questioned her. To which she sighed at his hopelessness, then went straight to explain.

"According to Iruka-sensei, Wind is THE rarest natural affinity across every ninja in the world. Sure, some people can use them, but having a natural talent for that elements is extremely rare; even among the other Hokage, none of them had a wind-style affinity and the element can be one of the best combat-focused natures of them all."

Naruto's eyes grew bright than the sun with everything Sakura described, until Kakashi joined-in.

"She's right. Truth be told, there is only one other ninja in our village who has this kind of natural affinity; Asuma Sarutobi. Naruto, having this element certainly is amazing."

"Hey, there!" Nami cut in between them. "If Naruto can use wind-power like that, what about using it the sails to propel the Merry if we lose the natural wind-currents on the ocean? Or he could blow-away storm-cloud that come towards us too?"

Naruto was dancing around the deck now, almost singing about how great he was, while Sasuke eyed him carefully and Sakura sighed in exasperation.

"That might be useful as well, Nami. But, it's still a very, very long way away. Knowing your affinity is one thing but learning how to use it is an exponentially harder process. For now,"

The Jonin pulled out a scroll and a single light-bulb, unsealing the former to reveal a pile of green leaves on the table. Taking three of them, he held two out towards Sakura and Sasuke.

"The first step to learning how to use your elements to the fullest is by becoming more familiar with their use. Sanji, will you grab Naruto for a moment?"

The cook reached out one arm, snagging Naruto by the collar and dragging him over to stand before Kakashi, "Quit complaining, brat. You know what you have now, so focus on learning how to use it."

Naruto immediately grew quiet, distracted by the lesson.

"Thank you," Kakashi nodded to Sanji.

"Now, I have a few of these leaves from Cocoyoshi village. Sakura, Naruto, I want each of you need to take one of these leaves to hold in your palms and channel your chakra into them for a while. Sakura's goal is to soak her's all the way through using only her chakra, while Naruto has to cut through this leaf in the same way. Once that is done, we can start learning how to use specific wind and water jutsu. Deal?"

"Believe it!" Naruto shouted, snatching one leaf and backing of the start. Sakura only nodded and started doing the same. While Kakashi tookt he light-bulb and held it towards Sasuke.

"Sasuke, you have to take the light-bulb and keep it running from around 5 minutes; then we'll start with the same. However, it has to remain on with your chakra alone, and not end-up popping from an electric over-charge. Do you understand?"

Nodding, Sasuke took his own and started the same.

Kakashi nodded, then walked away to the prow.

"Hey, where are you going, Old-man Kakashi?" Luffy called after him. With a deep sigh, the Jonin turned back to face the crew.

"Well, I've been helping my students train all day so far, and I can't let myself remain complacent either. It's time to look after my own training for a bit; and refine a few techniques I learned a short time ago."

"I'll be out here practicing different ninjutsu if anyone wants to watch-but not my students!" he cried out, spying Naruto getting distracted.

"Each of you are to keep working on your element affinities, then I'll move on to something else. That is an order!"

Naruto gulped down and turned back to the matter in-hand. Each of the pirates looked on as the Genin kept trying, and found some strong disappointment. For all the hype, Naruto kept checking his leaf to find not even a small scratch in it, while Sakura's was even worse and she found herself growing tired, and Sasuke only managed a small flicker on his bulb.

Zoro watched each of them sternly, while Ussop nodded before walking downstairs and returned with several cases of tools and supplies.

"Might as well make some fresh stars. And work a little more on that new tobacco star," he muttered to nobody. Yet just as he sat down, a terrifying roar emerged from the sea as the waters began churning around.

"Oh no, Not a Sea King!" Nami exclaimed, while most of the others began looking everywhere in terror. Yet, the next moment, a massive dragon shot up from below them.

"Waster-style: Water-Dragon jutsu!" Kakashi's voice announced.

The serpentine spectre was crafted solely from water and spiraling up to the skies, revolving around the Going Merry to climb twice the height of the mast. The creature hung above them, in great magnificence, before dissipating into millions of tiny water droplets, forming a rainbow that left everyone in awe.

Kakashi looked on, before weaving through the signs again and repeating the same process.

Gin, Nami, Ussop and Luffy ran up to him, shouting their excitement and bombarding him with questions. While Zoro, having seen the same thing before, only knocked Sakura, Naruto and Sasuke to focus back on their own practice.

Sakura formed her hands in a tiger-seal, ran his mind over the different steps to the Transparency jutsu, then applied it.

"Transparency jutsu!"

Unfortunately, no changes came in her physical being at all, still the girl could feel her chakra spreading throughout her body rather smoothly. Glancing in the mirror, a frown curled beneath her massive forehead.

'Hmmmmmm. I can feel it working, but not enough to bring any changes to my visual form. Maybe there is another way to apply this, or I could....wait, how about I try that!'

As she began to critique a new possibility, Kakashi took a deep breath and looked out towards the sunset.

'One final try, then that's be it for the day.'

Gathering his hands, the man ran through five different hand-signs before extending his left arm straight above his head.[5]

"Ninja Art: Hidden Mist Jutsu!" Follow his commands, a wide spray of water engulfed the Going Merry, shifting about until the entire ship was obscured by the heavy mist. Everyone on-board froze in their activities, having been warned by Kakashi before he began practicing this jutsu. Feeling around, the Jonin body-flickered to the stern, to find approval for himself for finally covering the entire Caravel.

Forming another hand-sign to dissipate the jutsu, the Copy-nin noted his progress from the day.

'That was every technique I gained from Zabuza during our encounters. There is still a lot of room for improvement, and I have to use far too many hand-signs for the Hidden-mist jutsu since the mechanics will take some time to comprehend and master.'

'On top of that, the next water-vortex and water-dragon jutsu will take a lot more refinement in-case I need them in a pinch; but this has been a good day overall.'

Satisfied, he looked back over his students. Sasuke was now doing warm-downs with Zoro after managing to reach 15 seconds with the light-bulb. Zoro himself was balancing weights on his feet, from hand-stand push-ups while holding an even larger dumbbell in his mouth. Luffy was also there, with a single giant bar across his shoulders weighted down by nearly half a ton. The rubber-man was doing jumping-squats under them, propelling three feet in the air before landing down with enough elasticity to dissipate the impact from rocking the boat.

Ussop and Sanji were tying several ropes and cleaning one part of the deck, while Gin, Naruto and Nami had disappeared indoors.

"I did it! Kakashi-sensei, come here! I did it!" Sakura cried over at her teacher. Holding up her left arm, the colours of the limb were a swirling collage of the wooden deck behind it and their true colours.

Kakashi noted how it stopped at the elbow, and grinned with approval "Good job using creative thought Sakura. I believe that is enough work to focus into this day for your ninjutsu. Let's run through your taijutsu-forms again, then we will call it a night."

The girl stopped jumping, swallowing back the instinct to decline more physical activities forming in her throat. 'Remember what Sensei said, and I guess it is a good principle to improve something I'm bad at, she reasoned.' But another voice had separate ideas.

""What but look here at what I'm doing now!" Inner-Sakura complained, kneeling towards a goal labeled "Transperency," while

another far, far below it was labeled "Taijutsu."

"Yes, sensei."

For the following 30 minutes, Sakura followed the basic fundamentals under Kakashi's watch. His eye for details let nothing falter, editing even the smallest flaw in her movements and stance. Sakura herself was soon covered with sweat, such unfamiliar movements and the intense focused they demanded leaving her entire body rigid, strong, and straining.

Finally, Kakashi asked her to throw a light series of punches, and allowed her to relax.

"Ok everyone!" Sanji announced. "Naruto and I will go start on dinner, then make some calls around when everything is finish."

With that, Sakura dragged herself down to the women's cabin with Nami close behind her.

As they came to their room, the girls began to stretch while Nami faced her new roommate with a warm smile.

"After working as hard as you have all day, I imagine you're exhausted, Sakura. Ready to eat and then drop into bed?"

"Actually Miss Nami, I was hoping to take a bath after all the work from today before eating dinner," the pinkette replied.

"Oh, great idea!" Nami praised with a smile.

"It's been a while since I got a bath either, Sakura. Why don't we take one together? The hatch up there leads right to the bathroom. I'll ask someone to draw-up some water."

Minute later the girls were in the bath, taking turns in the narrow tub while the other stood close-by soaking up the steam. Nami offered Sakura to take hers first, then to wash her back and hair. Now

Sakura was leaning back in bliss, feeling Nami's gentle hands combing through her hair. While the older teen smiled in reflection:

'Nojiko and I hated bath-time at first. But then, it became so much fun together, especially with Bellemere playing along with us after getting us washed-up.'

Smiling at the sweet memory of the only mother she knew, Nami's mood began to shine with a thrill; of thinking back to that time and her home with a sweet, clear conscious, free of any worries about Arlong or her sister's life.

While Sakura, her face hidden from Nami's eyes, quickly began frowning towards herself. The girl was feeling sore and exhausted in 2 dozen different ways. But, all of it was tempered by a few specific moments from her recent memories:

' Time began to slow for Sakura, watching her new friend fall to her knees, from a bullet wound in her shoulder....The Marine pulled the trigger. Another shot tore through Ussop's right pectoral... Sakura's mind, trying to digest what was happening. Everyone around her faded to the background, tunnel-vision forming on Nojiko and Ussop. Until a hand seized her by the chin, turning the girl to face its owner.'

"" CHichichichichichichichi! Quite a pretty thing," Nezumi appraised her. "Young, healthy and with room to grow. Perhaps Alrong would allow me to take you to a Human Auctioning House as compensation for my wasted time.""

' Breathing hard, Sakura was on her knees as the Fishman moved to attack. Her eyes wide in terror, the Genin could only raise a single kunai towards his sword, with both hands and hope. "Exploding star!" A fresh explosion hit the Fishman's face. Before one person in brown overalls appeared, hurling through the doorway with a hammer in-hand.'

' After landing in a crouch, the final enemy snatched her by the hair, holding the girl up before himself. "Nobody moves! You have hurt my

brother's enough. One more thing, and I will kill this one!" he demanded.'

' Sakura struggled against this enemy, the pain on her scalp running deep. "Ow, ow, put me down! Let go! Let go!" Sakura's hands rose above her head, clawing at the strong fingers while her legs were flailing about with each word.'

"Something wrong, Sakura? Why does your face look so down?"

Jumping in the bath from Nami's question, Sakura looked up at her. Thinking back to her line of thought and raising single hand to her scalp, Sakura's features became deep and regretful as she arrived at a decision.

"Miss Nami, do you know an island where someone can get a haircut?" she asked.

"Hmmm... well I could style it up for you-Wait!" Nami's eyes grew wide, perplexed.

"You actually want to cut all of this? Why, your hair is gorgeous!"

While Sakura did enjoy feeling Nami's gentle hands comb through her hair and nodded that she did enjoy having long hair, the girl had given some thought into this choice.

"You see. Back during the fight with Arlong's crew. One of those Fishmen grabbed me by the hair and was almost helpless. Kakashi-sensei was right about how we need to be more ready for battle, and if that guy hadn't wanted to bargain..."

Sakura drew her legs in, hugging tightly around herself while looking aside in shame.

"He might have just killed me right there. All this training the Kakashi-sensei has us doing will definitely make us stronger. But more than that, I need to be a real kunoichi from now on! Better skills will be

one thing, but I also need to remove some weaknesses. Some ninjas do have long hair, but right now I'm just too exposed like this," she explained, running one hand through her long pink mane.

"Please, will you cut it for me after me finish here?"

At her pleading eyes, Nami pondered the concept. Then nodded, smiling down at the younger girl.

"Sure, I will. Let's dry it first then we'll do it in the storeroom. But for now, it's my turn in the bath."

Grinning, the girls changed places, with Sakura helping her, and somehow thankful for the second voice in her mind

" AAHHHHH! Your Boobs are so much bigger than mine! If Kami had blessed me with such a killer bust, Sasuke would never keep his hands off of me at all! I'm gonna find your secret Nami, so get ready to spill when it calls-CHAAAAA!"

"Huh?" Nami herself held one shoulder outside of the tub, with a bandage on her shoulder. Sakura was about to ask, until she recalled watching Nami driving a knife into that very spot, tears shaking from her eyes until Luffy ended her misery. Deciding not to ask, the girls quickly finished up before doing some fresh cloths and walking up to the kitchen.

Inside, Sanji held a large bowl of paella that made every mouth water. While Kakashi and Gin were holding Luffy to the wall until everyone else had taken a share of the meal. Once that was done, the Captain took the whole giant bowl and started eating as Sanji began to cook up second-helpings.

Everyone was at the table, ready and relaxed from all the activity they'd seen and done from the day.

"Hey there, Sasuke? Kakashi?" At Luffy's call, both shinobi faced him with neutral eyes that would not last very long.

"Back at lunch, Ussop asked you about Sasuke's clan, and promised to talk more about them right now. So what is so big about the Uchiha?"

Quick as a snap, the peace around the table broke apart. Pierced by a sharp thrust, sending many to grasp Luffy's question with sincere curiosity, while others shivered in their seats.

Sasuke didn't move, holding a bit of food close to his mouth, with eye wide at the memories of everything that had been taken from him. Naruto and Sakura both remained quite, joined with Nami as she recalled her own reflections over tid-bits of Sasuke's past.

"Captain," Kakashi answered him. "I... did promise that. But, to a ninja, giving out information about our home isn't really-

"No, Kakashi!" Sasuke cut him off, pushing his plate aside. "From what we've seen, Luffy probably won't stop asking if I don't tell him something, just as he refused to accept Sanji didn't want to join at first."

Everyone fixed their gazes upon him, some intense while the instigator simply took another mouthful. Sasuke remained hunched over, taking deep, deliberating breaths. Zoro took close notice of this, as did Sanji as both gave their stronger focus to the boy.

"Since none of you have ever been to the Elemental Nations, it makes sense that you wouldn't know about it. It's no different from our ninja-arts or the ranking system that Kakashi shared with you earlier. I'll tell you about my clan, and their history. And why there is somebody out there that I need to kill, one day,"

Folding his hands, the Uchiha grew silent....marshalling his thoughts into a clear way to describe....everything.

As he took a deep breath, the Uchiha looked across the room, finding everyone several eager crewmates, and one apprehensive

navigator to hear his story.

"For hundreds of years, ninja were divided among different clans, or extended family who lived and trained together; hiring their services out to clients or even entire nations. One of those clans were mine, the Uchiha Clan; and were famous for our power and skills."

"Many of the different clans were enemies and rivals with one another, and spent a huge amount of time fighting and killing other clans," Sasuke continued, fixing his eyes on the table while the story came through his words.

"All of that took a powerful toll on the clans, some even forcing children onto the battlefields to fight for the memory, honour and vengeance for the family they had lost."

Clink! CRANGGG! Nearly everyone winced at the sound, of glass breaking on the floor. Nami's hand was slack, her face absolutely pale, ignoring the cup she'd dropped.

Upon hearing of children being forced to fight and die, she was not the only one shaken. Gin's gaunt face lost an entire shade. Zoro was sneering in disgust. Sanji had even dropped a pan on the stove, without a slightest care or concern. Ussop couldn't respond and even Luffy himself was glaring.

"But all of that changed nearly 80 years ago," Sasuke continued, catching their attention once again.

"My clan were the strongest rivals with a group called the Senju Clan. Their leaders, one of them Hashirama Senju, formed an alliance and desired to live in peace, protection and to end the suffering from the Warring Clans era. Both of them achieved that ambition but founding our home, Konohagakure, the Village Hidden in the Leaves, that was named by an Uchiha.[6] Other clans gradually joined them as well, and the model for a village they created was copied by other ninja's from different nations; creating the Hidden Villages."

"Out of those villages, there are 5 Great ones that wielded greater military power, political renown, numerical dominance and more compared to small villages. Each of those have a leader known by the title of a Kage; and within Konoha our leader is the Hokage, or the 'Fire-shadow.'"

"The decision to choose the First Hokage was between the leader of my clan, Madara Uchiha, and the Senju clan leader, Hashirama Senju. It was put to a vote and the Senju was chosen as the First Hokage, and was followed by his brother, the Second Hokage."

"My clan was entrusted by Lord Second to be the Konoha Military Police Force, singled out from the other clans to ensure Konoha remained safe against outside and inside threats. Later, Madara Uchiha left Konoha when he felt the Senju were too dominant, but my clan remained loyal and desired for the peace to continue rather than plunge into another war. And we stood as one of Konoha's strongest powers across Three Great Ninja Wars that followed between the Great Villages."

"And many were renown as powerful ninjas and great heroes along the way," Kakashi cut into Sasuke's musings.

Everyone's attention shifted to him, as the Sharingan Warrior began sharing more details.

"The Uchiha clan have long be famous inside of Konoha and beyond for their innate aptitude for everything related to combat, and tendency to produce many talented ninjas. Many of them have long traditions towards certain powers and skills; and many became great heroes to their villages."

"Kagami Uchiha himself was a direct student who learned under Lord Second Hokage, Tobirama Senju and became highly famous. During the Third Great Ninja War, Sasuke's own father became an extremely renown figure, known as 'Wicked-Eyes Fugaku.' And other Uchiha, Shisui, became extremely famous for his speed; to the

point he could move so fast they called him 'Shisui the Teleporter.'
I..."

Kakashi's mind began to ponder over the image of another young Uchiha, wearing goggles and proclaiming he would become another Hokage. An image quickly replaced with the same figure buried under rock, half his face crushed beyond recovery and begging him to keep their friend alive.

"Yes!" Sasuke cut into the gap left by Kakashi's silence.

"My clan did become very powerful and very famous for years. My father actually was the head of the clan, I'm Fugaku Uchiha's son. And-"

"Wow, Cool!" Naruto's voice cut him off, leaving Sasuke fuming at the constant interruptions.

"That name, 'Wicked Eyes' sounds so awesome! Hey, maybe you could get a name just like that and be as great as your Dad was, Sasuke!" The blonde was grinning straight at his teammate... his, very perplexed teammate.

Sasuke's mouth hung in an O, before tying it in a line to force the tiny smile from breaking out at the idea. "Maybe, Naruto. My father was one of the pillar in my life, but his time often led him away from our home due to the responsibilities as the Military police chief."

"At one time, he taught me the Grand Fire-Ball jutsu. Learning it is a right-of-passage within the clan, with mastery earning someone their place as an adult; and a technique I successfully accomplished by age 8."

Sasuke paused for a moment, as now... the story was moving on to *that man*.

"Quite an impressive feat, and one that left me surprised," Kakashi interjected again, but this time Sasuke sighed as he took the opening

to process the emotions attached to those memories.

"Sasuke managed to surprise me with that jutsu in our first sparring session; most Genin have not developed enough chakra-levels to use such a move, especially since it takes more raw power to apply. Within Konoha, children have to pass through the Ninja Academy to become ninja's at all, learning and nurturing their fundamentals in a safe environment, and not being thrown onto battlefields to either die or learn. Even after graduation, they follow D-rank odd-jobs until their patience and capabilities are dependable before advancing to handle greater dangers."

At that concept, it was easy to watch the Straw Hats start to breath, again. The tension invoked by describing children forced onto a battlefield drained away as the excessively safer alternative was pitched to them.

"Sasuke himself would still have been an Academy student when he mastered the Grand Fire-Ball Jutsu," Kakashi continued.

"And the man who currently stands as the most gifted to come out of the Academy, is my brother," Sasuke proclaimed, his tone mechanical and detached.

"Brother!" Luffy's excitement came in a shout. "You really have one! That's cool, what is the guy like?"

"Wow, why didn't you talk about this before, Sasuke?" Ussop questioned with a grin. "Having someone that talented must be really great. I bet he trained with you a lot, and maybe taught you how to make that giant fireball!"

Nami herself almost smiled, before her face dropped like a stone! "Wait!"

Shooting to her feet, the girl's hands extended to the boys, silencing everyone. "Sasuke. When we talked beforehand, you....you said you were an orphan, and that your family had been stolen from you."

With just those words, a certain ice-man could have strolled through the room moments before. Nobody moved, least of all Zoro and Luffy. One of them were glaring now, while Luffy stopped eating, his face turning itself in a note, piercing black eyes honing in on Sasuke, with dread.

Naruto, who'd grown excited at Sasuke's story, had the recall of his teammate's family-state whipped back to the spot-light. His face stopped cold, then dropping into trepidation and reflection.

The Uchiha was silent, before coming to a decision.

"Yes. They were."

"My clan is still part of Konohagakure. And all of them can be found in one place," Fixing his eyes on the table again, Sasuke's lips made a twitch before a soft proclamation followed.

"All of them are dead, and are buried inside the Konoha Cemetery. And have been since the Uchiha massacre."

Sasuke didn't even pause before he continued.

"I was seven years old. I had spent the day out training and was coming home late. When I reached the compound... there were bodies everywhere. My clansmen, adults, women, children, all of them were lying about, in pools of blood!"

"They were... countless. Ninjas, civilians, elders, newborns, other children, all of them. Murdered in one night."

"I..." curling his hands into fists, Sasuke closed his eyes, sinking deeper into the memory.

"I lost my brother, Itachi, that night as well. I started running, finding more and more of them dead everywhere I glanced. Until I reached my family's home. There, my parents were dead, my mother's body lying over my father's. While *HE* was there."

A pulsing way emerged from Sasuke, lasting less than half a second; yet strong enough to raise the hairs of everyone in the room. Kakashi kept his own surprise hidden, with a close watch on the others in the room. None of them made a sound... Nami was covering her mouth, with eyes wide and filled with dread. Sakura was barely breathing, a paler shade than everyone else. Zoro and Gin could not contain their shock, one of them nearly dropping his sword. Ussop was hyperventilating, Sanji's mouth was pressed in a line, all composure lost.

And Naruto was gaping, soundless.

"The one, who killed them all, he was standing there in the room," Sasuke continued, drawing his arms around himself.

"He... captured me. Then for the following 72 hours, I was inflicted with torture, at his hand. Soon after, the man escaped and left me behind. I was in a hospital for a short time. And since that night... I am the last of the Uchiha to remain."

Turning back to face Luffy, the captain's serious face caused Sasuke to blink.

"You were alone?" Luffy's voice crashed through the room, even making Sanji and Ussop jump at the distraction.

"You had a brother that you lost. Everyone you knew was gone, dead, and you were all alone?"

Sasuke didn't even flinch, outwards he was calm, before mentally twisting Itachi's role into enough of a shape that it aligned with Luffy's words.

"Yes, Captain Luffy. That is what happened, from the Uchiha Massacre."

With that, silence ensued, the signal that Sasuke's story was complete.

The Uchiha didn't move for a time, until someone came to a seat beside him. Looking up, he found Nami's face, and nearly jumped at a weight settling on his shoulders. A pair of arms wrapped around him, pulling him into a hug.

"Wha-" "SHhh!" his question was silenced by a sharp hush.

"Sasuke. This is why, isn't it. The reason why you called me a betrayer for joining-up with Arlong. And not doing anything about the man who was responsible for Bellemere's death," she stated, keeping the boy locked in comfort, laced with respect.

"After that, Nojiko talked about suffering for revenge, or having patience to see it through, and then you questioned whether I could accept Arlong's fall without a hand in it directly."

Entire minutes followed, with Sasuke inside Nami's embrace, unsure about how it felt but not finding the discomfort that was present before she came. Elsewhere, Ussop's mouth hung open, tears of horror and disbelief pouring down his face. Sanji had burnt-out his cigarette and felt too numb to light another. Gin wasn't moving, unable to fathom such a loss, and recalling his own feelings towards the deaths of his crewmates, the closest family a pirate can know, at Mihawk's hands.

As the last Uchiha was about to speak, a sword slammed the table before him.

Everyone looked, to find Zoro standing nearby, with a presence daring anyone to speak.

"Your ambition," he stated, clear enough to cut through a mountain.

"When we first joined together. You stated you had no dream, but an ambition. To restore your clan, and to destroy a certain *someone*," the first-mate recalled, locking eyes with Sasuke, still inside Nami's powerful embrace.

"Someone that you especially hated. This man, it is the same one who destroyed your clan? And your driving goal is to kill him?"

Sasuke returned Zoro's glare with his own and gave his answer.
"Yes."

His brow sinking deeper, Zoro took a single breath. Drawing his blade, he leveled it towards both Sasuke and their captain.

"Then by this sword, by the promise I carry with it, and on my own honour as part of this Pirate Crew," the swordsman declared. "So long as you're here with us. I will train you unrelentingly and ensure you will have the skill and the strength to destroy that man the next time you meet!"

"This is my oath to you, Uchiha Sasuke, so long as you call yourself a Straw Hat Pirate!"

Those words echoed through the room, with different people reacting to them, but Kakashi the strongest of all.

"Yeah!" Naruto exclaimed, "you're letting us help you Sasuke! This is something you want to do, I get that. But you're letting us train you to get there, and to find this guy and make sure he doesn't slip away when you kill him!"

Naruto's eyes were burning, showing determination and new form of rage. It wasn't the type of anger most of them had seen before; not anger for his own purpose. Naruto was furious, on Sasuke's behalf.

Frowning at this additional pledge, Kakashi found himself more than slightly torn at the turn-of-events. He rose to his feet-but Luffy overtook him.

"Zoro!"

"Yeah, what is it Luffy!?" the swordsman demanded, then actually blinking at the look in Luffy's eyes.

"As your captain, I order you to follow that promise through, no matter what or where it leads to!" the rubber-man commanded, driving Sasuke's amazement even higher, while Nami's face drew a serious line, nodding her consent. Ussop got a grip on himself, while Gin nodded as well, and Sanji let out a breath.

"This man did something unforgivable. Make sure that Sasuke is good enough to not lose to him. And so that he doesn't end-up all alone either!"

"Whether you're a ninja, a pirate, a bandit or anyone," Luffy's voice came, filled with a drive and reflect that set everyone in silent awe.

"Pain is something we encounter all the time. But after your clan died, you were left feeling something worse than pain, because nobody else was around, were they?"

"You were alone. And being alone is much worse than getting hurt. Right?"

Three people at the table found themselves shocked deeper than the core. One of them was in Luffy's cross-hairs, leaving the other pair unnoticed.....

Naruto swallowed, sneaking out of the Lounge and back down to the men's quarters, Luffy's words echoing in his mind. Kakashi found his self-disciplined tested near the limits, recalling all the times someone was lost in his life and the total sense of loss invoked by every death of those close to him, and the regret from Itachi's actions as his own protégé in the ANBU.

"Y... yes," Sasuke's confession snapped the Jonin back to the present. "You're right, Captain Luffy."

"Then we'll get you that strength, to beat this guy when you meet him. Deal?"

"Let's slow down!" Kakashi moderated between them, stepping up before anything went further.

"Now you all know about the Uchiha clan, and Sasuke's motivations. It's getting dark out, and my students have another long training day tomorrow, so let's get-ready to turn-in for some sleep. Naruto and I have the watch tonight, so can you send him up here?"

Everyone suddenly found themselves deeply worn after the emotional roller-coaster Sasuke's life threw them through. Quickly, some even found themselves nodding and walking off the sleep.

Nami lingered behind, still forcing Sasuke into a hug but saying nothing to him. Strangely, the boy found stronger comfort in that, and the lack of hollow words others had given to him before.

Soon, they were moving to their own rooms, especially Nami to find Sakura drawing out a futon and spare set of bed-sheets.

Back on deck, Zoro came out from the Lounge, to find Kakashi waiting for him. "I want to speak with you, about Sasuke."

Frowning at the disapproval laced in his words, Zoro nodded over to the side then waited.

Kakashi didn't move for some moments, sparking a duel of whitt's between them. Gentle waves shook the boat, clear ocean breezes swept over, but neither man moved.

"If you want to talk me into taking back that promise, don't waste your breath," Zoro demanded, his arms folding across his chest. "The kid isn't going to give up on a memory like that, and whomever it was, the man who destroyed his clan needs to pay at his hands alone."

"I will not deny that," Kakashi responded. "Sasuke has been obsessed solely with his revenge across that past 5 years since that happened. He actually lashed out against Sakura and myself when

we became cut-off from the Elemental Nations and had no way to return, cutting him off from that revenge."

"Even during the fight with Arlong's crew, Sasuke was blinded by his sense of vengeance and nearly got Naruto killed. I want him steering towards a more measured mindset, without revenge as the paramount factor in his training. That is absolute!"

Now Kakashi was very serious, invoking Zoro with the temptation to obey. Still, the First-mate's will was strong.

Zoro glared back at the man, grasping Wado Ichimonji even stronger in his hand.

"Nothing is going to stop Sasuke after a goal like that, even I know that much, now. Nami herself went through a different kind of suffering and watched the man responsible for destroying her life run around unopposed for nearly ten years. Often, the best way for anyone to learn is by making such mistakes and growing through them."

"I did the same thing when I challenge Mihawk before knowing I was ready. Yet I survived it and learned much more, now. Naruto also lived, and that obsession isn't going to leave simply through distractions. Learning how to hone it into a fine blade, and not an unwieldy club that smashes everything around itself sound like a good plan to me."

Kakashi sighed, finding Zoro had the wrong understanding in-mind. "I agree with you, but such a drive needs to be tempered first by creating something to counter-balance that revenge. First, survival and depending on his teammates should be the better way to follow, then bring revenge back to mind when he can lean on others and rise above his revenge. That is what he needs to learn and grow in. And make fewer mistakes that will leave others endangered, or dead."

"Tell you what, ninja," Zoro challenged him. "If you share your life-story with me, then I'll do the same, and we'll see who can know and recognize that kid's drive and ambition deeper."

End.

[1]- You all know who this is. And his Skull jokes are great, shaking anyone's funny-bone.

[2]- The name for part of a tonfa, the longer poll the separated from the shorter end, the Soko, by the handle. The Monouchi is turned outwards, while part that rests against a wielder's forearm is the Shomen.

[3]- There are several crossover fanfics that apply different powers from their canon-material without much analysis into the mechanics or confines of those sources. Naruto's system of chakra is a rarity in how systematic and computational different powers can be, rather than softer ones that keep their mechanics quite vague. Hence, genjutsu or even the Juken would be useless in One Piece without specific contextual explanations, see "Demons of Family and Destiny," Chapter 14 for one such example.

[4]- To date, I have not found a source in the Naruto Manga or Anime that depicts Kakashi actively using wind-style. He is attributed with all four elements and does make heavy proactive use of them throughout the series, but his natural light-affinity would make Wind-style an innate shortcoming to use with his own chakra.

[5]- I am aware the in-canon seals for this jutsu are much shorter. However, Zabuza himself was a consummate master of this skill, while Kakashi would only have been able to observe the mechanics of the technique. He and Zabuza never had the direct contest over with the Water-Dragon Jutsu with the Hidden Mist Jutsu.

I doubt that Kakashi would be able to directly emulate the same results without such a visible exposition of the very technique. So

some experimentation was needed to produce the same results, and to further cultivate one very valuable skill to have out on the ocean.

[6]- For all that he did in-life, death, and his third time around; Madara truly did provide the name "Village Hidden in the Leaves."

And that's a Wrap! I promise, future training scenes in Growth Through Chaos will not be this excessively long; but there was a lot to cover to build the context for how the ninjas will train and grow going forward.

It took a lot of re-writing this chapter to find something I was satisfied with that did not become a boring mess of excessive writing. Cutting different parts down to size and shifting the focus of different exercises went a long way. Plus, it was fun to add a few gags like Nami's wardrobe-malfunction, and Sanji announcing his dream (yes, I did use Dragon Ball Super for inspiration there, season 1 episode 17 "Vegeta's doing WHAAAAAAT!")

And then there was the Uchiha massacre to cover. I didn't reveal Itachi deliberately, as there are more opportunities to unveil his part later on the Grand Line. Especially around more people who would literally go nuclear at hearing what he did; Ace, Whitebeard, and Charlotte Katakuri especially.

I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter, and the developments that are now beginning to kick-off.

As for the length....

Personally, I actually dislike regulating most of the growth and training different characters undergo to the gaps between different scenes; as it can actually detract from the growth and drive they cultivate leading-up to a later fight. Especially if they talk about throwing so much time and effort into training, which readers do not see happen and almost make their claims feel like hollow complaints.

Training montages are great and make the success of the hero even better when the fruits of their dedication start to pay-off. Especially towards characters like Zoro and Naruto. But, almost too often the POV of the anime focuses on a small number of people and the growth others make can leave the audience very unexcited; such as comparing Zoro's growth to Luffy's 2 nd Gear and 3 rd Gear that almost came out of the blue. They did carry shock-value but lost that same intensity after a couple of re-runs. The same can also be found in the Naruto Chunin Exams Arc, comparing Naruto's training to fight Neji against Sasuke's off-screen developments with the Chidori.

Here, I plan to give more of the Straw Hats their own training scenes, though I promise that any as long as this chapter will be sparse. And, of course, the best candidate for them to turn to will be a certain lazy grey-hound in-love with Icha-Icha Paradise.

Kakashi's gonna hate it.

Sharing the past

Growth Through Chaos: Chapter 17: Sharing the past and moving to the future.

Results of Garp and Smoker:

By a strong margin of 21 to 7, Garp is on his way to Loguetown! Thank you everyone for voting, and I am privately glad to have this chance to write something so original. However, Smoker and Tashigi will not be overlooked....it is time for a funeral.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto.

A tense air hung around the wharf, dense enough that you'd need an axe to cleave through it. A Navy ship up above was now meters away, pulling in beside a second one; a makeshift prison barge. Genzo could barely swallow past the lump in his throat. His conscious split between hope and instinct.

The leader watched on as a mooring line was tied down, followed by the gangplank and brick wall of a man striding down. The figure he unlit cigars crossing his jacket, with a shock of white hair and one weapon tied over his back. "So this is really him, huh, Johnny?"

"That's right, Yosaku," the bounty hunter-turned-protector answered his partner. "Smoker, the White Hunter. Don't know about the girl beside him, though."

Smoker had his jacket closed and there wasn't a cigar in his mouth. At his shoulder, a younger woman stood whilst additional men were

filled up behind them as the leading officers stared over the townspeople of Cocoyashi village and thralls of others from across the Conomi Islands. "Which one of you three is Genzo? The guy I spoke with on the transponder snail?" Smoker called with a bitter edge in his tone.

"I am," the local officer replied, with Johnny and Yosaku flanking him. "I take it that you are Captain Smoker? We have the Arlong Pirates and the Marines who conspired with them over in that ship. And the logbook you asked for is in my possession."

"You don't have it here with you?" the bespectacled lady asked in confusion. "If you hand it over to us then-"

"Quiet, Tashigi!" her superior snapped, brisk but not unkind. "It makes sense that they aren't wavin' it around. If crooked Marines are involved, leaving these people to suffer, they don't have much of a reason to trust us straight outa the gate."

"But sir," she protested. "True Marines stand for justice and service. We can-"

"Then where were you when my Dad got killed!" a child's voice rang up from the beach. Turning their eyes, a boy with a green beanie occupied everyone's attention. "Arlong came to my home, Gosa Village. His crew turned everything upside-down when one person couldn't pay him. There was so much killing, and my father among them. Another Marine, with a face like a rat was around and even shot some people here just because Arlong let him to. Why should any of us believe that you aren't different from them!?"

The female Marine's mouth hung open, unable to reply. Until her sight was blocked by a white jacket, carrying the symbols for "Justice" covered by a signature jitte. "You're right, kid," Smoker answered him for all the Marines behind him. "All I can say to you is that I'm sorry. And I want to see this traitorous, bloody monster pay for every crime that he's done. If a Marine was corrupt here, then he'll pay for it along with Arlong, and anyone who was tied with

them." The man's words carried over the crowd, drawing their entire attention to him. "You all got my word on that."

"I'm not really one for formalities, but this is somthin' one nobody under my charge can take lightly. If you'll allow it," Smoker propositioned, "I'll take each of the Arlong Pirates off your hands, and we'll hear testimonies of every one of you. Then ensure this scum, and the insults who let'em run around get buried so deep in a prison no sign of daylight will reach 'em."

"But first." The Marine drew to his full height, standing at the best attention he could muster. "I heard from Genzo how a single Marine tried to fight off these bastards and got killed by him. A woman named Bellemere."

"That's right." A new face stepped out from the crowd; Nojiko. "Bellemere managed to ambush Arlong, but when her rifle was right in his mouth, he bit the barrel to pieces. She meant to protect my sister and me, after adopting us years ago. And our mother met her death at Arlong's hand without a flinch."

"Nojiko!" Genzo shot himself in front of her, as Smoker's face morphed, turning into a glare promising death in his gaze. Tensions began rising until the Marine dropped to his knees. Smoker's forehead met the ground, his crew following their captain; prostrating themselves before the people.

"I met Bellemere years ago before I made Captain," Smoker announced. "That woman was indomitable, even pledging to fight any fools that come poking around in the East Blue. I'm sorry. For the suffering you've had, and from losing her."

"Her death never should have gone ignored, and everyone behind me wants to put that right." Raising his head, Smoker faced a stunned group before him. "First, I'll be moving each of the Arlong Pirates and crooked Marines aboard my ship. Then, if you'd show us where her restin' place is, we'd desire to hold a formal ceremony from one Marine to another. Once all that is done, will you consent to

turn over the Logbook that you mentioned when you called me here?"

Nobody moved, the Marines holding the full attention of the crowd before them. Nojiko's hand came to her mouth, the woman's form trembling at this promise. Genzo beside her felt tears stabbing in his eyes. After several swallows, he could speak again. "I would call that fair enough. All the rouges are inside the ship right here. The two men beside me are former bounty hunters, and the best guys I can supply to help move those fishmen anywhere."

"That won't be a problem," Smoker gruffly declared. "I'll move all od those bums to the ship myself a few at a time. Arlong' bounty does mean a pretty if somebody's lookin' to claim it. If you two," he nodded at Johnny and Yosaku, "and everyone else will meet with my subordinate Sergeant-Major Tashigi, she'll record accounts of everything you say."

Both parties nodded and everyone split up. Johnny and Yosaku led Smoker inside the smaller Marine ship, while Tashigi walked over with Genzo and several men to address the crowd. "Yosaku and me'll speak after all these guys are packed away tightly." "Yeah, you got an issue with dat?" Smoker just gave a tilt of his head at their offer and strode aboard the barge and moments later, smoke came billowing through holes from the ship. "What? Fire! Did those men honestly escape!?" Genzo panicked.

"No, sir," Tashigi intervened, the other Marines doing the same with more in the crowd. "It's Captain Smoker's Devil-fruit at work. All is under control."

That rendered the crowd excited, recalling another Devil-fruit user's role in Arlong's downfall. Slowly, the smoke they could was shifting towards a hatch in the deck. Seconds passed, the dense vapour growing stronger until Arlong was brought into the daylight. The Shark-Fishman was air-born with nowhere to reach, moving higher and higher until the Marine Captain stepped above deck, his shoulders linked to the clouds entrapping the prisoner.

"Quit struggling," Smoker snarled, "or I'll pump it to your lungs and let ya suffocate." Rapidly, the cloudly links to Smoker's limbs extended until they reached the deck of his own ship, where additional men trained swords and gun barrels on Arlong. Chains were brought forth, cuffing the Saw-tooth Captain, until Smoker was satisfied and released the smoke.

Arlong didn't say anything, apprehensive eyes wondering over the smoke.

'So, this guy's encountered Logia's before, huh?' Smoker silently grasped.[1] '. Damn, I was hoping to have a chance to rip him to pieces,' Turning back to his job, a few at a time, each of the prisoners was transported to waiting men ready to cramp them all into a brig.

While Tashigi worked diligently to collect the accounts from each person in the assembly.

'Every detail must be meticulous, otherwise, these criminal pirate filth may not receive the justice due to them at the hands of Navy authorities with a fair and indiscriminate will,' the junior officer pledged.

Finally, all was done, rendering Smoker free to martial a special party of men together.

"Captain Smoker?" Turning, the White Hunter found Genzo facing him, with a leather-bound book outstretched. "Here is the logbook you asked for."

Taking it in hand, he read through some random pages, slowly.... carefully.... with an iron will keeping his hands from shaking with rage. "Tashigi!" the roar from him forced everyone to jump, and she was beside him within seconds. "Lock this up in that safe I got in my quarters. Then... I'm gonna hunt that Rat into a Yonko's territory if I gotta!" The Captain broke with formalities now, tearing three cigars from his chest belts and lighting them.

While her Captain kept fuming, Tashigi obeyed and his men continued very, very briskly.

After another moment, Smoker took a breath and let out a cloud twice his size from the cigars. Crossing back down to the wharf, he stood before Nojiko. "Miss. Will you lead us to Bellemere's grave? It's several years overdue for her to be honoured and remembered as a true Marine should be."

It took only minutes before she and Genzo were walking to the cliff-side, Smoker and Tashigi following them at the head of a parade with several Marines in dress uniforms. Along the way, more from Cocoyashi village turned up, joining the processing. Upon reaching a simple wooden cross, the Marines reformed into ceremonial positions. Smoker stood before the grave, with Genzo and Nojiko beside him in a daze, and he spoke.

"To serve and uphold justice. To enforce and maintain the order of the World Government. To fight in the service of a cause that will demand all that you have to give and more. These are what every Marine is expected to do.

"One Colonel, and each man under him, threw that aside. And those you wished to serve and protect suffered from it, Bellemere. You gave the people of this Blue so much, and the Marines even more. I still recall how you spoke about not standin' around while pirates threatened innocent, ordinary people when I joined up."

"We can only give justice for what was taken from you. And honour the courage and commitment you undoubtedly showed, in every choice you made. From the moment you decided to stand beside us, to staring down death for those you took into your own care."

Nojiko openly wept, the memory of her beloved mother's death passing in a blink, and now recognized by strangers she had known with pride, broke her heart. 'Na.... mi. AH... I.... I wish you... - that-you-could-see-this,' her thoughts raced.

Smoker stood back in respect, watching as Genzo held the young woman upright; trying to hide his own grief beneath his cap. Turning back to the grave, the Marine Captain froze a second.

His mouth dropping open, Smoker would swear he saw a woman, tall, tough, and sassy, shimmering in the sun behind the grave.

"Uhhhh.... umm.... Men! Salute!" Smoker commanded them.

"SIR!" At this signal, lines of Marines cocked their rifles to the sky. In turn, volleys rang through the island, marking respect for the fallen.

Once they ended, the Marines stood vigil over the grave. Led by Tashigi, each one began to sing. The tune was long, melancholy, and with purpose.

"The Sea watches us quietly. Guiding us through our death and our birth.

"From humble hometown waters, to the waves at the end of the earth.

"The Sea carries us carefully. Through the dark of night and light of day,

"To the World that is just and peaceful, so that we never lose our way,

"All our pain and suffering, it swallows up in its warm embrace.

"So knowingly and gently, washes them all away.

"The sea watches us quietly. Guiding us through our death and our birth.

"From humble hometown waters, to the waves at the end of the earth.

"There will come a day, I'm sure, when I must heed its solemn call,

"And walk side by side with my old friend, resting in its foamy waters." [2]

Without music or joy, they sang. A requiem for the fallen, it travelled over the site, down across the waters and high to the heavens. Helping a single spirit pass over into the peace she now could feel.

Elsewhere in the East Blue, night had fallen with an ink-coloured shade. Clouds above were hiding the moon, while tranquil seas gently caressed the Going Merry.

Hatake Kakashi and Roronoa Zoro were sharing the deck, one forward on the bow and another near the stern. Zoro had completed an evening training session one hour ago[3]and was staring out towards the distance. The swordsman was still digesting Sasuke's motivations, grappling with the magnitude of how much his young nakama had suffered and what he had set before himself.

Revelations that were further compounded by Kakashi, having taken the swordsman's challenge for his life story.

'The guy's own father reached a level of shame powerful enough to kill himself,' the swordsman reflected. 'Following that, his own team and sensei, this 4th Hokage, goes and dies under a year later. Growing up, training, and bonding with people like that... only to watch them die in front of you.'

Gripping his fist around the hilt of Wado Ichimonji, Zoro frowned ahead, torn between his head and his gut. 'Losing Kuina was one thing, but Kakashi has been through a ton more than I have. It's rough to imagine it. But I still think he's got the wrong idea to try and talk Sasuke into working towards giving up his revenge.'

Across the deck, Kakashi himself was cursing. The weight of Icha-Icha Tactics in his tool pouch was agonizing. 'Why couldn't the moon be kind and provide the light for my favourite book? It was even better to read through it for a second time. To think the hero at the climax would be-'

"GU-AAAAHHHHHH!" In a snap, two noises came with a spring! Zoro, closer to the source, stormed into the lounge with a solid guess about what was going on.

Sure enough, a giant mousetrap occupied the room, directly before the fridge and pinning a certain rubber man under the hammer. Luffy was pushing off the ground while trying to move his knees and slide out from underneath. Zoro groaned while Kakashi arrived, followed by Sanji.

"I thought this would happen," the cook muttered. "Several before shutting my eyes tonight, and he still tried it."

"Hey, who's stealing all our food!" Several pattering feet carried Naruto through the door, in his collared pyjamas and with a buck-tooth cap on his head. Once in the doorway, he looked between the fridge, to the table, then down to the floor. "Captain, you woke all of us up with this much noise, ya know!" the boy tried to chastise him, striding forward as Luffy kept struggling under the mouse trap to reach his goal. Naruto had both arms folded, walking around to stare at Luffy's head, between it and the fridge when- "Gu-AHHHH!"

A rope on the floor became taunt; its loop closed on Naruto's ankle and hoisted the boy to the rafters. "Huh! Hey! Hey, this isn't funny," Naruto cried, swaying from one side to another while his audience choked. "Believe it! Someone let me down! Luffy was stealing our food! Who set up this trap anyways!?"

"Naruto," Sanji spoke up. "You... just triggered your own back-up trap."

"Ghuuu?" The knucklehead slowly recalled making this very prank just a short while ago.

"I did? Well, don't say it to anybody," Naruto insisted, trying to get down. "Please, Kakashi-sensei, this would ruin my rep."

"Too late, Naruto," Sasuke called over from the doorway, while Sakura and Nami strode in and had their own laugh at the scene. Sanji whipped up a midnight snack for everyone, then pried Naruto and Luffy out of their traps and back asleep.

Soon sunny skies, crisp and salty ocean air, and the sound of waves promising a comfy day were all around them. The entire Straw Hat pirate crew were gathered for breakfast, especially a certain knucklehead blushing as his sensei recounted the trap from last night.

"HAHAHAHAHA-Naruto, what kind of fool trips into their own trap?" Usopp was rolling over the floor while Naruto himself turned red.

"Hey, I said I get it, okay?" Naruto muttered over.

"Well, it'll certainly happen again," Sakura chirped. "You fell into the same trick during our training, twice. Remember, cutting yourself down from one loop sensei tricked you with, then getting snagged airborne by a second one in the same place?"

Even Sasuke smirked at that detail, as did everyone else at Naruto's expense. "I get it. I get it. I get it. I get it. I get it."

"You know," Kakashi spoke up, from behind his favourite book. "I recall giving a lecture of how merely saying 'I get it,' isn't really the same as actually 'getting it.' 'Get it?'"

"Sorry Naruto," Nami shrugged, "but sometimes looking straight at your own mistakes can be a good way to learn." Kakashi, Zoro, and Usopp both nodded at this. "Miss. Nami," Sakura spoke up after a strong breeze threw strands of hair into her eyes. "After we eat, do you remember what I asked for last night?" Nami spied what she was pointing to, and nodded.

"Yummy! Sanji, this breakfast is tasty!" Captain complimented.

"GGHHUUUUU! Luffy, you stole our food!" Ussop exclaimed, stomping one foot on his empty plate and pointing straight at Luffy. Gin and Kakashi noticed their own toast and eggs were gone, and the former leapt in with Ussop.

"Okay. While all of us are up," Nami announced, over the three rolling around the cabin, "let's discuss where our next destination is. There's a small islet that we should reach by tomorrow. Then we could spend some time there, but the next place after that could be, well, anywhere."

"Hmm? You really haven't decided on a new destination?" Kakashi inquired, quite seriously. In reply, the rest of the crew looked sheepish; especially under the watch from all the ninjas.

"To be honest with you," Nami continued, "before, I was always looking for new people to steal from or getting back to Cocoyashi Village. But now that it's safe and out from Arlong's grasp, having the chance to go anywhere is... well, new to me."

"You're not the only one, Nami," Zoro spoke up. "I was always wandering around looking for new opponents or a town to stay in before I met Luffy."

"That's eashweee! We're gwoing ta th'Gran Lwine!" Luffy proclaimed holding Gin away while Ussop was yanking on his stretchy cheeks. Pulling himself out of it, Luffy shook his head. "Everything we want to do and find is on the Grand Line. I have a crew now. All of you have your own dreams, and we just beat a lot of pirates here! Let's go to the Grand Line, men!"

"Yeah, believe it!" Naruto shouted together with him. "That's where we'll find our way home too! Bring it on, let's get going!"

"Slow down, Naruto," Sakura admonished him. "Chef Zeff used to say that the Grand Line is a Graveyard, where a lot of people can die. If we just run there without making sure we're ready, things could

go really, really badly! And we don't know for sure if the Elemental Nations are even there for sure!"

"Ya got a sharp mind, thinkin' like that, little lady," Gin nodded at her, walking back to the table. "Don Krieg, myself, and all ah 5,000 crewmates went there with that same attitude. Now... so many are dead." The former cut-throat had to blink away tears for his own crewmates.

Kakashi especially found himself uncomfortable but for different reasons. 'There's no Hokage here; no mission to follow, and no absolutely clear way for us to follow. It's... strange. Really strange to lack something that clear to fulfil a mission or a goal.'

"We are ready!" rang a forceful declaration from Sasuke. "Arlong himself came from the Grand Line. And so did the crew that followed him. We beat them, so we should be ready to handle that place, too. The sooner we go there, the sooner all our goals can be fulfilled. Right?"

Few people felt up to challenging the boy, recalling what his goal was from their conversations earlier.

"Ya, Sasuke's got it right!"

"HUH!" Kakashi's eye was wide, while Sakura dropped her teacup! The cry had come from Naruto, who was waving his arms around and swinging side-to-side. "We're better than Captain Krieg, or Arlong, 'cause we beat them! And we can still get better with more training together and beat anyone we run into! Why not head there starting today?"

"I like the sound of that." the first mate smiled with the boys, gripping his sword. "After winning over Buggy, Kuro, Krieg, and now Arlong, I guess there isn't much left the East Blue can offer up for us. The sooner we run into stronger enemies, the more skilled I can grow. And that needs to happen a lot for me to keep a promise and defeat Mihawk, someday.

"But. We need to stop somewhere else first," Zoro announced, frowning. "I need to get some new swords after the two I had were destroyed by him. Plus, Cocoyashi village didn't have everything we needed for a voyage like this one. If we can find a town to stop in close by, we can buy everything up and then head to the Red Line and enter the Grand Line."

"Shishishishishishishi! I like how that sounds, Zoro. Maybe we can find more meat in a bigger town. And a musician, too. We need one for this to be a great pirate crew!" Luffy spoke, wrapping his first mate in a friendly headlock.

"I don't see how that is so important, Captain." Kakashi tried to moderate them. "And who was this 'Buggy' that you defeated before?"

"Wait!" Gin shouted out, planting both hands on the table. "Cap'n Luffy. Zoro. The two ah you taking about Buggy the Clown?! The Immortal?"

"Hm. Yup," Zoro answered with a smirk. "We ran into a fight with that clown, just Luffy, Nami, and me. He and everyone with him were really weird, plus they tried to kill Nami after she stole treasure from them."

"WHHAAAATTTTTT!" Sanji roared from the kitchen. "Somebody else hurt Nami-swan! Where are they? I want to cut them into fractions!"

Luffy and Zoro both grinned, sharing their story about meeting the eccentric, disembodied clown. Sanji became satisfied after hearing about how Buggy nearly attacked Nami but left his lower half behind, for Luffy to kick his family jewels. Gin, Sasuke, and Kakashi were befuddled over a Lion-tamer and swordsman on a unicycle; but stranger things had already crossed their paths before.

"Even before him, I met Zoro and we won a fight with Captain Morgan! Next, we found Ussop and his town was in danger from

another pirate called Kuro, too! Then we met all of you right after that." Luffy finished, taking another mouthful of meat.

Most of the crew thought over this. Until Gin spoke up. "Ya know, Don Krieg kept a track ah major players in the East Blue. Just in case we ran into 'em. If Don Luffy beat all ah these guys, then there ain't nobody here to challenge our crew on these seas. Maybe we are ready for the Grand Line. With some extra prep."

The rest of the group mulled over this until Kakashi rose to his feet. "First, we learn more about this 'Grand Line.' Then we can plan our next step. Captain," the Jonin announced, locking eyes with Luffy.

"I also want to train Sasuke, Sakura, and Naruto up more, and improve some of my own moves before we head into the same place that Mihawk came from. How about we spend a few days on the islet Nami talked about, then sail to somewhere close to the Grand Line and ask around for more specific info about the place."

"I like that too, Kakashi," Nami chimed in, standing at her feet. "I'd like some days to rest, without keeping this boat sailing. Maybe even try on my bikini and get some time in the sun."

Watching Nami slip into a striking pose, Sanji's glee nearly shook the boat, while Kakashi's eye traced her figure.

"That.... sounds nice," the Jonin muttered. "Still, if we take our time, it could involve trying some different restaurants on the way. With some very rare, very tasty meat."

That sealed it; Ussop and Nami even groaned at the inevitable.

"Yeah!" Luffy exclaimed. "Alright! We're going to a town, somewhere! Then off the Grand Line, to find the One Piece!" the Straw Hat Captain declared. "So, where is it?"

"Lougetown!" Gin announced. Nami shot a look at the pirate.

"I've heard of that place, Gin! On one of my maps, Loguetown is the final port in the East Blue, right before the Grand Line."

"Tha's right, Nami. Loguetown is 'round 2-day's sailin' from the only way into the Grand Line, through Reverse Mountain. It's a pretty famous place, too."

"Oh? What's so important about a town?" Sakura chimed, following her curiosity.

"Little gal," Gin nodded towards her. "It's the city ah the beginning and the end. Gold Roger, the King ah the Pirates. The man whose treasure everyone chases to be the next King? He was born there. It's where his execution was held too. The spot where the entire Great Pirate Era kicked off from!"

The ninjas barely clued into that, but the reactions from Ussop and Luffy were totally different. Each shared a sense of awe that passed through the natives from the East Blue, even driving their captain into silence.

"Gin is right," Nami spoke up. "We should be able to collect everything we need there, with a little haggling. Learning some fresh news about both the East Blue and the Grand Line on the way would be nice too. But there is something else that we have to do there. In fact, it's our most critical priority."

The busty teen looped her arms around Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke, pulling them close with a smile bigger than Luffy's. "Shopping~!" she sang.

"Yesterday I was talking with Sakura, and she barely has any clothes at all! All of the ninjas here just have enough to fit into one backpack each! Nobody, especially a girl, can live off of wearing so little! I need to take her and the boys out to buy new clothes and dress up!"

"Miss Nami, that would be amazing!" Sakura squealed with glee. "I don't even have a bathing suit, or anything for time in a bath or the

sun. Out here with all this water, it would be really good to have one; especially with some perverts aboard."

The last comment came with a glare towards Sanji and Ussop, unforgiven after a wardrobe malfunction and pestering to learn the transparency jutsu.

"I want to go too, Sakura!" Naruto called in. "Getting some new stuff sounds cool! Maybe we can get more Ramen? And see where this famous guy came from. Oh- but I'm still looking forward to training more, right, Luffy?!"

Only silence met the Genin. "Captain Luffy?" More of the crew looked over at their captain. The excitable teen... was totally quiet.

"Loguetown. The place where Gold Roger both lived and died. I gotta go there and see it. The spot where he got killed, and the search for the One Piece all started from."

Slowly lifting the straw hat from his head and staring down at it, Luffy's face evolved from complete reverence to an empowering grin.

"That's my next step. To living up to my promise to Shanks!" Zoro, Ussop and Nami understood now. But the rest....

"Who is Shanks?" Naruto asked what was on the other's minds.

"Huh!..." Luffy stopped staring at his hat, shifting over to Naruto. Several faces followed, Luffy trying to make sense of what had come, then dropping a fist into his hand. "Oh! I never told you did I! Some of you guys don't know about Shanks! I gotta tell ya!"

"What's so important Captain Luffy? If Shanks is a friend of yours, is it so important that we need to know about him?" Sasuke inquired.

Luffy met this with another smile, reaching to the heart of his soul. "Shanks is the reason I set out to be a pirate. I wouldn't be alive if he hadn't been around, and he's the one who gave me this hat!"

A short story followed, describing everything Luffy had done with the Red-Haired pirates. Everyone but Zoro fell off their seats at hearing about how Luffy stabbed his own face to prove he was tough enough to be a pirate. Naruto did one worse by calling it cool, and the first mate agreed; leaving Sanji, Nami, and Kakashi to nail the latter upside his head, then demanding an oath from Naruto to never try the same thing.

What followed was how Shanks would brush off anything done to him, Luffy eating the Gum-gum fruit, Shanks losing his arm to save Luffy, and finally gifting him his precious Straw Hat.

"That's when I decided I would become the King of the Pirates! Shanks in on the Grand Line too, and now that I have a crew and I'm tough enough, I'm eager to go there and become a famous pirate."

After hearing his story, Sanji lit a fresh cigarette, Gin didn't know what to say, and each of the Konoha ninjas were deeply impressed. Naruto found himself reminded of Iruka and the Hokage, especially their belief in how he could one day become Hokage; while Kakashi's hidden smile was clear to spot; Sakura and Sasuke didn't know what to think, the former having never had such an inspiration in her life before, while the later recalled a shadow of feelings for his own father but without such inspiring feats.

"Yeah, and Luffy isn't alone either! Right pal!" Ussop spoke up, looping his arm around the shoulders of his friend. "Uh-huh! Your Dad was really great too, Ussop! He's the only guy who could be a better shot than you are!"

"Right!" The sniper took a dramatic bow towards the rest of the crew. "You all see, my dad and I follow a similar strategy. We both joined different crews with a frontman to claim he's the captain, but the real power and brilliance come only from us! Yassop is my dad's name and he's part of the Red-Hair Pirates too! And he's a sniper, just like I am! That's a real smart system, huh?"

Nobody bought it for a moment, and Luffy was too happy to care. "Yassop told me all about Ussop, and when I met him, he had to join my crew! Yassop even said he wanted to stay with his wife and Ussop, but when the seas were calling him for adventure, he just had to follow it!"

Gin and Sanji both narrowed their eyes at their nakama. "So, your mom was okay with all that? Leaving home to become a pirate like your father too?" the chef inquired through his smoke.

At this question, Ussop's mood dropped harder than a Devil-fruit in the open seas. A grieving mood came to his face, filling Sanji with regret. "Uh....my mom. She got real sick you see, and... and passed away. I was a little kid. Afterwards, I kept running around talking about different pirates coming to our home or helping out Miss. Kaya to feel better."

Sanji hung his head. Unbeknownst to everyone, to cook was thinking back on his own childhood, and a loving woman always in bed, very sick. Nami had already heard this story, but this time she raised a comforting hand to Ussop's shoulder. Gin and the ninjas were respectful; but Naruto himself drew a face, totally unable to relate. Having never even met his own parents or their names. At all.... ever.

"So, you both want to go there to find these men; Shanks and Yassop. Especially because one of them saved the Captain's life." Kakashi summarized.

"You got it!"

"Yeah, I want to go there and become a brave warrior of the seas! Facing every challenge with nerves of steel and showing the world the strength of Captain Ussop!"

"Hey, I'm the captain!" Luffy complained. Causing the crew around the table to laugh out loud.

"You know, what kind of roles do we have here on this crew, Captain Luffy?" Kakashi asked from the blue.

"Ahhhh, dat's a good point, Kakashi," Gin replied to the Jonin. "Don Luffy, I'm wonderin' that too, hereabouts. You named Zoro the first mate, Sanji's the cook, Nami is the navigator, and Ussop's always talkin' round bout a sniper. Do the kids, him, and I have any role in the crew."

Everyone at the table eyed their captain, with a classic mouthful that somehow wound up in his greedy gullet.

"Wha's th' ribig-rehal? Yoor-"

"Swallow first Luffy!" Nami berated him, right in her seat to his right. After gulping down a load wide enough to stretch his throat, Luffy shot a dim look at Kakashi.

"All of us are Nakama, and old Doctor guy said we should get a ship's doctor too. After we get a musician. Do you really need some kind of job here?" Now the Genin were looking over at the oldest men around.

"Well, Don, it'll be for what I'd do day-to-day. Just in general if nothin' big's blowin' up in our faces," Gin replied, lost to have a captain and didn't make demands every other moment.

"Plus," Kakashi stepped in. "Technically, you were employed by us to travel until we find our home island. I'd feel bad letting that go without giving some work back in exchange. Usually, Jonin in our village use their time to train, or as security inside the group we live with. Genin often do small jobs, cleaning, running chores, or babysitting to build into-"

"Don't lie, sensei!" Naruto exploded, now standing in his seat. "All that kid stuff was not what ninjas do! We need to get out and get big missions, and get strong."

"Maybe not," Nami purred with a dangerous look. "That sounds an awful lot like a cabin boy's role. They're the lowest rank on a crew, doing odd jobs like cleaning, running at the other's whims, and learning all about sailing by learning on the job. Kakashi can keep his title as 'Jonin' or 'master-at-arms,' and as for Gin we could use a 'Quartermaster' who knows about sailing and fighting."

"And we have three new Cabin-kids. Or maybe... Cabin-Genin," the navigator smirked connivingly.

Both men pondered their roles, while the other three appointees were sharing gob-smacked horror.

"SHishishishishishishishi! Great Idea, Nami!" Luffy proclaimed, looping an arm around her shoulders. "That's real easy. Gin's Quarter-guy, Kakashi's the Jonin, or arms-guy, and we have three Cabin-Genin!"

"No! Luffy give us something else, please, please, please!" Naruto wailed, throwing himself on the table to bow.

"Hahahaha! A little too late, Cabin-Genin!" Zoro's mocking drew glares from each of the kids until Nami herded them out for their new chores.

The day continued, with the newest Straw Hat Nakama settling into their roles. Zoro continued training on deck, with Kakashi beside him doing his own intense exercises. Envy was heaped upon them, solely from the Cabin-Genin as they were broken into the meticulous roles involved with sailing by Nami and Gin. Ussop and Luffy forced Sanji into playing tag with them until Naruto jumped in with a demand for hide-and-seek.

"Hold up, Naruto!" Gin called over. "If you come in th' Lounge firs', I can give yer art one last touch-up, and it'll be complete."

"Oh wow!" An orange bolt flew through the door, leaving Team 7 perplexed.

"What kind of art can Naruto be doing right now?"

"Watch out, Sakura," Sasuke answered her. "We might find out soon."

Kakashi gave a shrug, then pulled a kunai from his pouch. 'Alright, now, let's see if Pakun is truly out of reach.'

With a prick on his finger, the masked Grey-hound wove his hands through five symbols, then planted one hand to the ground.
"Summoning Jutsu!"

"Whaaaa!" Zoro nearly dropped his load, several spiralling signs flew over the deck, centred from the Jonin's hand, lingering for some moments. Looking over, the swordsman found the Jonin sweating mildly.

'I.... I barely feel.... anything,' Kakashi realized. Holding the power for a moment longer, he completed the jutsu. Its reward gave a cloud of smoke, then nothing. Rising to his feet, the Hatake stared at his hand.

"Sensei, what did you try and summoning?" Sakura was at her teacher's shoulder.

"Well, Sakura," he replied. "I have a contract with a pack of Ninja-Hounds. I often use them for tracking, ambushes, scouting, or even messengers. Previously, I initially wanted one to track down Nami after she slipped away at the Baratie, but the jutsu failed."

Sasuke stood a short way away, while his teammate only cocked her head. "How can that happen, sensei? I read about the Summoning-Jutsu before, and even the most preliminary tries can bring something out from the technique."

"Correct," he nodded. "I executed it properly, but still nothing emerged from the jutsu. I'm going to pour over this for a while and try to figure out why. As for you,"

Giving her a trolling smile, the Jonin slowly pointed back towards the deck. "I believe that Gin assigned you to 'swab the deck cleaner than a mirror,' Kakashi recalled, with two fingers curled to quote the words.

"Wouldn't want Nami to revoke your shopping rights for being lazy, do you?"

Pouting with all her might, the Cabin-kunoichi had to stomp off back to her job, passing by Sasuke who went back to tying and untying the mast lines.

But, suddenly a door was thrown open with a bang.

"It's finished, believe it!" Naruto came flying out, shirtless and with something on his shoulder. "My tattoo looks so cool, ya know! Hey sensei, what do you think? Huh? Huh?"

Kakashi couldn't blink, watching Naruto parade his bare left shoulder around; sporting a jolly roger with whiskers clear on each bony cheek and the Konoha head-band design on its forehead.

Sakura's jaw hit the ground, while Sasuke's face was blank.

"So cool!" Ussop and Luffy both exclaimed, running over for closer looks. Zoro took one look and smirked, "Guess you're a true pirate-ninja now, Naruto. Good pick, too."

'Kushina....' Kakashi bemoaned, looking towards the heavens. 'Please forgive me.' Imagining what the Hotblooded-Habanero would do with the picture of her twelve-year-old son getting a tattoo.

Nami herself came out the next moment, in a tank top and showing a new tattoo of her own; a spiralling vertical cross with a large sphere off the top arm. Luffy and Sanji were right beside her.

"OOOOOOOOH, real cool tattoo, Nami," the Captain eyed it, googly. "It kinda looks like pin-wheel guy's hat, and a piece of food. Is that

what it is?"

"Hahahahahaha~!" Surprise made Nami laugh from deep in her tummy. "That's right Luffy. You got it. Genzo's pin-wheel and one of Bellemere's Tangerine trees. I'm glad you like it."

Turning to face the younger Nakama, she smiled at his excitement. "Naruto walked in when I showed the design to Gin and asked to get his own too. It looks pretty cute on him."

"So that is what the three of you have been pouring over lately," Sanji nodded, taking a smoke. Gin strode up beside him, nodding. "Some'a my best work, there. And Ah bet Nami's happy to git Arlong's mark gone fer good."

"You have no idea how much, Gin," the young woman smiled, loud enough to send her thanks to the heavens.

"Hey!" Naruto called out, grabbing their attention. "Ya know, I wonder what happened to that Marine guy that Arlong was with. The one that Captain Luffy sent flying."

Nezumi, Former Colonel of Marine Branch 16. A proud realist and career Marine, to himself alone, was utterly beyond saving.

The toothless man couldn't even cry, no sound was made through the steel grip on his throat; in a hand strong enough to punch apart eight mountains.

'Whyyyyy. Why oh why oh why oh why oh why must I suffer?' the Rat silently moaned. 'How can any of this resemble fairness for my sake? After losing my teeth, swimming to an island with no hospitality, and drifting around in the ocean for days on a raft. This is where I wind up.'

"You repulsive, back-stabbing, corrupt piss-stream!" his captor roared, followed by a mix of rancid and putrid stink from Nezumi's

pants. The snarl facing him started to gag.

"Ahh-ghukkk! Calling you a maggot is unfair to maggots! How did something this low get in the Marines on the first day!? Monkey D. Garp declared, while at his side Bogart was glaring with revulsion. "Why the hell did I snag you outa the sea in the first place, toothless?" Garp asked, somebody, no one, it didn't matter.

While the Rat tried to spit at his new nickname, Bogard something whispered to Garp.

"WHAAAAA! How'd I forget that? About this stinkin' traitor pallin'-around with pirates who murdered his fellow Marine!"

Pulling Nezumi's face back to his, both the Vice-Admiral and the piss-pot were nose-to-nose. "I'm gonna pound you into the smallest pieces I can make," lower than a whisper, Garp's voice resembled death itself. "Then maybe call up the brat Sakazuki. He'd sure love to roast up the leftovers."

Back on the Going Merry, once the last of their chores were complete, the Cabin-Genin were pressed right back into ninja training.

The ship had reached the islet exactly as Nami forecast. Kakashi sent Naruto off first, running laps across the island to complete his water-walking exercises. Gin was leading two dozen clones around to search for different supplies, leaving the others to enjoy their time on the beach. Luffy had run off exploring while Sanji, Nami, and Ussop stayed aboard, watching the ship, reading a newspaper, and pouring over a handful of vials and a set of tiny shots, respectively. 'Just a few more dabs of this hot sauce. Then I've gotta find a way to test my latest invention: The Tabasco Star!'

Back on the beach, Kakashi suggested Sakura, Sasuke, and Zoro remove their shoes and start running over the sand. At first, they barely thought anything of it, until 10 steps in the sand dispelled that

fog. After some minutes of their feet sinking deeper into the loose surface, different leg muscles nobody felt before were screaming.

"Kakashi-sensei! This is really difficult to move on!" Sakura called over, wobbling on her legs and feet.

"Yes, I'm certain it is," the Jonin replied, from a hand-stand position crossing over different laps; struggling himself to stay balanced on his hands while pushing his entire body up. 'If only Guy could see me now. At least here he won't turn it into a race,' he thought ruefully.

"Wouldn't we get more progress by moving faster and further on a trail? Or what about across the water like we were doing at the restaurant?" Sakura suggested.

"I thought you'd enjoy the change of pace. Now keep going, else there won't be any shopping with Nami in-store for you." Her teacher's threat sent the pinkette off again, while the Jonin-sensei had to focus on his own struggles.

'This sand-running will allow their entire feet and leg muscles to develop since it doesn't have a stable platform, especially for the muscles in the balls of their feet, toes, and calves, rather than the heels and thighs . [5] Footwork and balance like that are essential for their speed and composure. At least with Naruto's stamina, he'll be able to complete Sanji's laps and then do this running as well.'

'After my talk with him. It's past time this happened.'

Lowering his body down, Kakashi's gloves and calloused hands left them unburnt by the sand, while the same principles as sand-running were applied to his palms, fingers, and forearms.

Several minutes later, Gin returned with the clones carrying the fresh-water barrel and baskets worth of fruits. Zoro finished running first, only standing upright from his time with sea legs on the ocean. Sasuke was behind him and fell to the sand once he couldn't stand

any longer. Zoro was ruthless though, demanding his new protégée get to his feet and then yanking him up after too long.

"Eh, Kakashi," Gin spoke to his crewmate. "Ah'm gonna work through with my tonfa for a while. That a prob'em?"

"Not at this moment. Although, I was hoping you would be willing to spar with Sakura at one point today." Kakashi's answer left the girl to jerk with surprise, squirming under Gin's gaze.

"She doesn't have the highest degree of practice in actual combat, and nothing can replace experience," the Jonin elaborated, before turning his single eye towards his students.

"Sakura, you'll be allowed to use each of your skills, weapons, and jutsu against Gin, but not towards a lethal degree. But beforehand, I want you to practice further with the transparency jutsu and your elemental affinity." As the kunoichi visibly relaxed at this news, Kakashi's attention moved towards Zoro.

"Zoro. One detail I noticed in your swordsmanship was footwork. Improving that would transfer into greater balance and mobility with all of your techniques." Kicking up some sand, the Jonin continued. "I take it you're already feeling the results from running here on the beach. This was a part of it, and further dedicated practice would be a notable benefit to your swordsmanship. Otherwise, I imagine you would prefer to train with Sasuke?"

Both the swordsman and the avenger nodded at this. Kakashi himself approved, so long as Sasuke continued his own jutsu practice beforehand. Each of the four broke off, Sakura finding a shady spot on solid ground, hidden from the sun as she rehearsed the hand signs for her jutsu whilst focusing on her arm. Gin had his single weapon out, twirling it around while composing his balance for the following practice.

Zoro and Sasuke remained close to each other, Zoro kicking off his boots and shifting around barefoot on the earth before drawing his

blade. Sasuke stood facing the open water, taking several breaths then executing the signs for his clan's signature technique, releasing a continuous fireball across the surf.

Kakashi watched everything closely while waiting for his important job that day.

"Heeeeyyy! Hey-huh-huh-I'm back! Believe it!" Naruto came running up the waves, waving over to the beach. Coming up to the group, he found they had moved on to different things, with a spark of jealousy towards Sasuke.

"Naruto!" At his name, the Genin faced his teacher. "For today, you and I are going to be working together on your skills. Including the fundamentals for a new jutsu. But first, let's head further inland to find a wide, open space."

At this the boy was jumping with delight, almost singing aloud about getting to learn a new jutsu. Kakashi himself remained patient, indulging him before turning towards the island and moving away from the group. Naruto hustled to catch up, smiling brightly all the while.

"Hey! Hey sensei, there's one of those out here! Just seven turns that way!" the boy called over, pointing to his right. Kakashi barely noticed, his mind somewhere else; worried over an immensely crucial matter. The man strode forward, placing a hand on Naruto's shoulder and guiding him further down the path.

'He must have found that from the shadow-clones memory transfer. I'll explain it a little later. This cannot wait,' he deduced, glancing around while Naruto questioned what was going on.

This continued until Kakashi found a quiet place and brought them to a stop. With a deep breath, he moved over to a flat boulder and took a seat. "Naruto," fixing the Jinchuuriki with a serious eye, he took a deep breath.

"I was honest with you, and there is a technique I will introduce you to today. However, there is something else we need to discuss beforehand."

"What-what-what-what-what-what? Come on sensei, this time is in the way of my training, and Sakura-chan or Sasuke are already getting stronger!" the boy complained, itching to get started. "How can something be bigger than us getting stronger?"

"The Kyubi, and how you are a Jinchuuriki," Kakashi answered, cutting to the point with a razor.

At this, Naruto came to a stop; his face evolving from excitement to fear, gulping down at this news.

"You and I haven't even spoken a word of it since Hanma Village. What I told you there still stands, Naruto," he reassured the sacrificed orphan in a calm voice. "You are my student and my comrade first and foremost, but ignoring your prisoner would be extremely irresponsible. What do you know about that so far? Take your time and tell me everything."

Naruto didn't answer. Not immediately. His mind was travelling back to the night Iruka and Mizuki had unveiled the truth. Stories from how the demon-fox had nearly destroyed his village, been defeated by the 4th Hokage -Naruto's personal hero- at the cost of everything he had, the ways other people hated or despised him in his own home. All of it and more.

Thoughts and feelings left behind when he departed for Nami no Kuni months ago... all came back this moment with a vengeance.

Naruto was shaking, his breaths growing shallow and erratic, blinking at those thoughts for some moments, until by strength of will, he pushed it all away and wore a fragile smile. "Uhhh. W-well, Kakashi-sensei. Oji-Hokage-san told me a little more after things with Mizuki and Iruka-sensei. About how it was sealed inside of me the day that I was born, and how other people blamed me for it. I

haven't thought about it at all for a bit. Not since we first got to the Baratie, ya know?"

Kakashi nodded. "Indeed. Naruto, if you want, it is actually possible to see the seal that contains the fox. However, do you know of how you could possibly use the Fox's power, at all?"

"Huh? S-s-s-s-sensei, I'm not the Fox! You-you said so, I'm Naruto! I can't do anything with it!" the boy protested, growing shaky with his words. Kakashi remained placid, holding one hand up to calm it.

"Yes. You are correct, and so was I, Naruto," he continued. 'Maybe, I need to coach him through this,' he decided. "It looks like there are a couple things that Hokage-sama didn't tell you about it.

"You see, another important part of having a Bijū sealed inside of you, is that tiny parts of its chakra are mixing in with yours. This means it might be possible that you can stay yourself, but at the same time draw on parts of the Kyūbi's chakra in a fight. Using its power to beat enemies greater than yourself and growing powerful as a ninja."

At this news, Naruto was quiet for a bit. "Huhhhh? Whaddya mean? I never did that before?"

At this, a frown came over Kakashi's face. "I see. Naruto, you may not have realized this, but the truth is that you have done that once before. All the way back in our fight with Zabuza and Haku at Tazuna's Bridge. Do you remember after Haku defeated Sasuke, a sudden rush of power came over you? Something that allowed you to match Haku's speed, breaking out of that ice-prison jutsu?"

Naruto followed his teacher's words. Thinking back, far back, to before his wish to the Genie had brought them far away from Konoha and the Ninja World he'd grown up in.

"Ohhhhhh!" Dropping a hand into his palm, understanding was clear in his blue eyes. "You mean that was the Kyūbi's chakra. Yeah, it

made me real powerful, sensei."

Seeing they were on the same page, Kakashi nodded. "That is correct. It allowed us to win that fight. Nothing like that has happened since, but it is still very, very important Naruto."

"Please, remove your shirt for a second and come here. As I said, it is possible to actually see the seal that is keeping the Kyubi-no-Kitsune locked away inside of you. But while it might not threaten Konoha from here, we could still be in a little danger from it. I want to check the seal and ensure it's working properly, then we have a lot to talk about."

Meanwhile, back near the beach, Sasuke was throwing a handful of shuriken towards Zoro. The pair stood amidst charred and tiny fragments of glass in the sand. Throwing stars bent around the swordsman, while Sasuke shifted his hands. Yet, the first mate shifted his blade, turning it in a flourish, causing the shuriken to fall around, randomly. Sasuke gasped, moments before a tug yanked him off his feet, straight into Zoro's grasp with Wado Ichimonji levelled at his heart.

The shuriken hung about harmlessly, the ninja wires connecting them to Sasuke's hands taunt around Zoro's blade. "You've done that trick one time too many, kid. I'm not skilled enough to cut steel yet, so I tied the wires around my blade to pull you in this close. You understand?"

Snarling at this lesson, taking it as a wound to his pride, Sasuke nodded. Zoro let his Nakama back down to his feet, sliding the wires clear from his blade then turning a glare down at his sparring partner.

"There something you want to say, kid?"

"I've never failed with that move before, Zoro-san. How could you have seen those wires without a Sharingan after I used my fire-jutsu to screen them?" Sasuke demanded, fiercely.

"Simple," Zoro gave back without a care. "You've done it to me several times before, even as far back as our spars at the restaurant. It became predictable.

"The same move reused several times over doesn't guarantee it'll work, Sasuke. You've grown stronger since we met, but the details in some of your moves are still the same without any changes at all. You just reuse the same one exactly from before and expect their nature to bring results."

Sasuke was still glaring up at Zoro, unmoving. Zoro himself merely scoffed. "Let's go again, then."

It continued this time with Sasuke dashing in, two kunai held ready in his hands. Elsewhere, Gin and Sakura were both aboard the Going Merry. Sakura had managed to leave more of her arm obscured before cutting that practice short to save chakra. Now she was pouring over different lists, writing out any and every tactic, strategy and scenario she could think of for combat. Sanji was nearby giving his own critiques, proving to have an aptitude for strategy. Nami herself was still going through the newspaper while Ussop's chemistry set lay about the deck.

Gin stood apart from the group, working through a handful of his Man-Demon style techniques; watching closely on the beach all the while. 'How long'er those two be? Ah can't just start fightin' with Sakura, else Sanji'll git in the middle for hitting a lady. Still.' Looking back towards where the younger pirate-girl worked, he nodded some approval.

'She's certainly makin' good use of the time. Plannin' like that saved dozens back in Cocoyashi village.'

Sakura herself stopped in thought, working to recall as many theoretical strategies from the Ninja Academy as she could. 'After using these in Miss Nami's Village, I should double down on them going forward. Maybe even prepare a few unique ones for fighting out on the open

ocean.'

"Um, Sanji-san? Miss. Nami?"

"Hmmm? Something up, Sakura?" the Navigator replied, while Sanji came out from the lounge. "How do ships usually fight with each other out on the open ocean? If we run into another pirate crew and they start a fight, is it better to be up close to fight them, or further away at a distance?"

Sanji took up the answer. "That depends on what kind of weapons you have." Setting down a cool drink beside the ladies, Sanji took a breath while reflecting on a good answer.

"We only have three canons on this caravel, so nearly every kind of ship on the seas will have more firepower than we do. Leaning on our captain's Devil fruits or Kakashi's Ninja powers will be our best bet to fight at a distance, but we'll still have a disadvantage. Otherwise, we can try to out-sail our enemies with Nami-swan's navigating or get up close to board them. Naruto's clone-ability would especially be a good method to use in that scenario."

Ussop perked up at this, nodding eagerly. "Hey, I'm a really good shot too, Sanji! Don't count my skill with the canons or my special stars out yet. We could also use how the Ninjas walk over water to try and take down another ship too, since that's one thing even devil-fruit users or Fishmen can't perform at all."

"Hmmm. Good thinkin', Ussop," Gin chimed in. "Beside's all dat, looking for the weathah or surroundings can be a handy principle. Fog and Islands are good places to hide behind, either to escape someone pursuing y'all or to hide and ambush."

Sakura herself continued writing all of these down, building different strategies for the crew to use in the future. Things kept on going back and forth between them while back on the island, Sasuke got thrown down again by Zoro.

Glaring up towards the green-haired warrior, Sasuke took a mental tally of all his ninja tools. 'I'm totally out, and still haven't gotten Zoro away from his sword at all.'

"You did better that time, kid." Zoro nodded, now sporting bruises on his arms, and a single foot-sized mark on his face. "That kick caught me by surprise. But if this is how you want to defeat the guy who orphaned you, then you're being stupid about it."

"WHAT!" Sasuke snarled up, loud enough for the others to hear. Zoro didn't respond. Instead, he cleared his blade and sheathed it.

"Kid. All that you've done is throw out different skills and expect the quality they have to do the work for you. Now, you're too predictable, and just double-down on what you've got, not try anything new or unexpected." [6]

"I've always won at the Ninja Academy!" Sasuke proclaimed. "Nobody there could challenge me at all, and I have to grow more powerful to kill It-... to avenge my clan! It's just the same as you getting stronger to beat Mihawk!"

Zoro fixed him with a stoic glare, unmoving and thoughtful.

"You're half right, and half wrong, Sasuke. First, I need to get stronger, you're on the money there. But Mihawk isn't sitting on his hands right now either. He's the Best Swordsman in the World, and to stay like that I know, without any doubt, that he's training too. Improving and sharpening himself to ensure that he will keep that title. A swordsman's oath and his blade in bound by their word; but this guy you wanted to kill. He's a ninja too. Isn't he?" Sasuke nodded, shaking to leap back into a fight. Zoro returned his glare, staying easy to drive a point home.

"Then it sounds like killing you first will be all that matters to him just as well. I'm willing to bet this guy is also training himself, just as Kakashi has been while teaching you, Sakura, and Naruto. Whoever

killed your family, if he's truly in the top league, then he likely has become a better fighter now than when he tortured you. [6]

Thinking back to his own revelation towards a certain rival, Zoro stepped forward. Taking Sasuke by his arm, the older teen pulled him over to the shade where they both sat down.

"Listen, 'cause I'm only going to tell you this once," he snapped to the boy, shifting in discomfort. "When I was a kid, I had a rival at the dojo I trained at. My sensei's daughter Kuina. On my first day there, I challenged her to a fight and she accepted. So-"

"What!" A roar cut off the story. Looking up, Zoro watched a Black-and-Blonde blur knock over Ussop, sail over the railing and dash through shallow water to deliver a kick for his face. Zoro blocked it, while Sanji followed this with a handstand, raining kick after kick on his first mate. "You started a fight with a girl, you senseless imbecile! Forget that first-mate title, I'm going to kick some decorum into you right here and now!"

Elsewhere, a shout of agony rocked the Merry, followed by a column of flame erupting from the deck. Ussop was running sideways, hands to his face and screaming, "WHHAAAHH-OOOWWW-HHH-HHHHHH-HHHHHH-HOT-HOT-HOT-HOT-HOT!"

Gin threw the sniper overboard, where the shallow water quickly solved Ussop's problem, as Sanji and Zoro wrestled around one another. Sasuke was watching the pair until a crazy sight left him stupefied.

"Gum-Gum: ROCKE STAMP!" Luffy came sailing down from the sky, flying a break-neck speed feet-first. Both his cook and first-mate had only seconds to get out of the way before their captain stomped down at the tree behind them; his rocket's impact with force in his legs shattered the bark to splinters, sending the whole tree clear off its stump and spinning further away from the island.

"Shishishishishishishi! Perfect. Now I got a new move to use on anyone who tries to hurt my crew." Their captain's voice came whimsically amidst the dust. Everyone else only blinked, Sanji and Zoro especially.

"Hm?" Luffy took a glance around. "Zoro? Sanji? Why'd both of you nearly come in my way?"

"I was teaching this idiot a sense of propriety, Captain!"

"Can you think about anything but women at all!?" Zoro shot back at the cook. "And quit jumping to one idea, pervy-cook! Kuina kicked my ass! That and the 2,001 times I sparred with her!"

Nobody moved at that news. Sanji even had to blink a few dozen times.

"Oh. That sounds alright then," he spoke while letting the first mate have a bit of space. "Hey, captain. You were training too right?"

"Yup," Luffy replied. Sanji himself threw down his spent cigarette and turned about to face the trees. "Well, I don't like feeling useless right now. Why don't we go to a separate part of the island and have our own spar together?"

"You wanna train with me!" Luffy cried with delight, palming his fist with a grin. "Okay! Hang on!" Throwing back his left arm, Sanji had one second to gulp. "Wait!-No, not this close-!"

"Gum-Gum: Pistol!" Luffy's fist came flying, for Sanji to duck by a hair. Pulling it back just out of counter-kick, the Rubber-man spun about to let his own leg fly out at his partner. "Whip!" Sanji dropped in a splits and the leg sailed over him and felled several falling trees.

"WHAT DUMB-ASS DID I GET FOR A CAPTAIN!?" he shouted before rolling around the falling trunks Luffy knocked towards them. Zoro and Sasuke had to scramble out of danger, all the while Luffy

ignored them, hounding Sanji while trusting his rubber nature to take a hit.

Sanji weaved around each collapsing tree, snarling now before dashing to drive a Collier-Shot right for Luffy's chest; sending the younger pirate flying to a cliff. "I'll kick your ass into fractions for that!"

Soon, both were gone; the sounds of their own fight and wreaking boulders grew lower. Leaving others on the beach in a blend of bewilderment.

"Zoro-san?" At Sasuke's voice, the swordsman came back to his prior point. Standing up, he walked over towards the last Uchiha, even as the others on the ship came across to listen in.

"As I was saying. Kuina was my rival, and within my first year at sensei's dojo, she defeated me 2,001 times. I challenged her that often, and she won each and every fight.

"All because she trained just as hard as I did. I was driving myself from before dawn until long after sunset, endlessly working to improve and grow stronger. I defeated every student in the dojo, even adults that were twice as old as I was. Yet, Kuina still defeated me because she was doing the same; training just as hard as I was, leaving the gap between us as the same."

Placing one hand on his sword, Zoro's gaze rested on the blade "You asked to train with me, and I pledged that you would be able to kill this clan-murdering bastard by the time our paths depart from one another. If you truly want to grow, start by becoming more personal instead of predictable.

"Each of those contests with Kuina actually compelled me to learn how to use two-sword-style. And then invent my own three-sword-style: Santoryu. Something unique, with different moves that I invented myself. I'm not saying you should sacrifice what you've already got, Sasuke. But start using what you have even better or

developing something different that someone else won't expect at all."

Sasuke blinked his eyes, taking in this new idea, slowly "I'm going to meditate for a bit," Zoro announced. "Think over what I said for a while, then we'll resume sparring again."

Gin, meanwhile, called over towards Sakura. "Alright, Little Lady. Now that the cook's gone, let's git sparring. Sanji'd blow a gasket if I were fighting with ya right in front ah him. Now that Don' taken him, we'll put this window to use."

Sakura gulped, glancing wistfully towards her plans, but she didn't want to disappoint her sensei again. Set them together, she followed Gin over to the middle of the deck. Ussop, standing in the surf, stole a glance back at the Merry, then looked down to his pouch. "Well. I might as well practice my sniping now. That Tabasco Star really has more potency than I imagined. But nailing someone's mouth or face could still be tricky."

While the Sniper strode off to set up his own targets, Sasuke himself stood still for a while, before turning over to watch Zoro. His eyes took on a gleam at the sword resting on his teacher's shoulder.

Nami herself began to feel out of place. 'HmMMM. Maybe I should get my bo out and join them? No, the sun won't be this high forever,' Nami soaked in the warm sun. 'I'll grab my swimsuit. Still, I wonder what Naruto and Kakashi are doing?' she asked herself.

Back in the clearing, Kakashi kept a very close watch on Naruto while speaking about Jinchuuriki.

"The Kyubi is considered top-secret. Even details like these are kept hidden from any lower than a Jonin's rank. But, given how we are right now, keeping things from you might not be the best choice.

"After I examined your seal with my Sharingan, everything appears to be balanced and intact. It's also designed to allow a fraction of the Biju's chakra to be funnelled into your own chakra and kept locked away. That was a crucial point made by the Four Hokage for your own safety. But it can also allow you to draw on its power easily enough to be dangerous."

"Yeah-" Naruto cut him off. "You just told me that if I go with too much the seal can break, and I would die. And that happens each time a Biju breaks out from the person holding it inside of them."

Watching him carefully, Kakashi stayed silent. Letting the boy process this on his own.

"Basically, I'm stuck with the stupid Kitsune for life. And if the seal breaks, it might hurt our nakama if they are around me." Naruto summarized in a tone filled with fear. His body trembled at the idea of the ones he'd met dying because of him; all whilst the Biju within him sneered with glee at such a concept.

"Yes," Kakashi answered, blunt and direct. "In another ninja village, Kumogakure, that happened quite often with the Gyuki. However, it never did inside of Konoha and the chances of that happening to you are very small. For now. They might grow larger if you use the Kyubi's power too often, and-"

"WHY!" Naruto screamed. Facing his sensei, tears mixing anger and fear were rolling past his whiskered face. "WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ME, SENSEI!? FOR MY LIFE TO BE SO BADLY SCREWED LIKE THAT SO MUCH!?"

Begging the only source of answers he had, Naruto curled into himself, his fists tight and trembling. "I... I.... Sensei, I'm not the Kitsune....and I don't want anything to do with it either! Why did everybody hate me for maybe letting out that monster, when I'm gonna die too if that happens! It's unfair, from so many people, even-!"

More may have followed, but a hand came to rest on Naruto's shoulder, drawing his attention towards a certain Copy-ninja.

"Yes. It is unfair, to say the absolute least."

Naruto stopped cold... awe growing through the fog of rage in his mind. Hearing sympathy from anyone was still so alien to him.

"Naruto, do you know what a ninja is?" Kakashi continued, in a gentle voice. Drawing from memories to emulate his own sensei. 'Minato-sensei. I hope this will work.'

"Ummm... sensei. Ninjas save people, don't they? They rescue their comrades, protect their homes, and follow their nindo to the end. Right?" he answered. Kakashi nodded.

"In general, yes. But at the same time, a ninja is one who endures. We are people who set goals for ourselves and are measured by what stands in the way of those goals. Everything that we surpass is what a ninja can be judged by, even things we find hateful and unfair."

Taking a deep breath, Kakashi thought back towards how his other two students had become angry before. And what shocked the pair of them into growing more amicable with others and their situations.

"Believe me, I know more than a little about an unfair life. If you want, I'll tell you about some things that happened to me before I became a Jonin. Not about important missions I finished or great enemies I overcame. But about what I lost in my life, and what I did to endure it."

This was followed with the story of Sakumo Hatake, right up to his death. "Everyone in the village turned against my father. Right up until... he took his own...." Kakashi had to swallow several times. Turning over a stone he left untouched for years, a second time within months.

"I found him in our home after he killed himself. After that, Naruto, I became focused completely on being the perfect ninja; you might not know this, but I actually graduated from the Academy at age five and became a Chunin when I was six years old."

"Whoa! Huh?" Naruto went from horrified to excited, then confused all within seconds. "Uhhh. Sensei I forgot. What's so big about a Chunin?"

Kakashi's face fell flat. 'Did he really just ask that?'

"Naruto. There are five official ranks that a ninja can have after they complete the Academy." Kakashi, with straining patience, explained. "Genin, Chunin, Jonin, Anbu, and Kage. You, Sasuke, and Sakura are each Genin, and I am a Jonin, an elite ninja. Chunin are in the middle, the same rank that Mizuki and Iruka had. Didn't you learn this in school?"

Naruto's face scrunched up in itself before a light bulb clicked, and he went totally sheepish. "UH... huhuhuhuhuhuh. Now I remember them, sensei. Guess I fell asleep or didn't really try to hear when Iruka-sensei talked about it."

"Hhhhhh..."

'It looks like my work is going to be harder than I thought,' the lazy greyhound reflected silently before taking another breath to speak about the other matters.

"Coming back to what a person can endure. After completing several missions, I was assigned to a team with a new sensei and my own teammates. But that was during the 3rd Great Shinobi War, and a lot of people were dying."

"On one mission..." Kakashi had to stop, repressing a shudder threatening to course through him. The image of Obito's body buried under rubble, and Nohara Rin's mouth coughing blood flashing in his sight.

"Both of my teammates died in that war. On separate missions right before my eyes. The first one saved my life and became crushed beneath a giant bolder. As he lay dying, he begged me to protect the one I still had left... but even she died right in front of me a short time later."

Kakashi had to fight the instinct to grasp his right hand, recalling the sickeningly wet sensation of it piercing through her heart. Naruto didn't speak. Rustling leaves up above and distant waves become the only sound between them.

"Then, during the Kyubi attack a year following the end of the war, even my sensei and his wife died in the fighting. I wasn't allowed to join, as several younger ninjas were kept away from it to ensure the future of our village would grow up and nurture those to come after them."

"I lost... everyone I have ever known. Every one of those losses was a mountain, too steep to climb myself."

Turning aside, Kakashi's single dead eye met Naruto's wild blue ones. "It took everything I had to endure that. And become the ninja I am now. I tried to do it on my own but fell down several times. Still, there were others, people who picked me up along the way." Without meaning too, Kakashi's mind brought images of his rival Might Guy, the grandfatherly Third Hokage, and even Pakun and the other dogs to his conscious.

"That is how I became a great ninja, and why I will not allow any of my comrades to die. Again"

"Naruto," he addressed his bewildered student. "That even includes preventing you from becoming lost to the Kyubi-no-Kitsune. I know you have been through an immeasurable amount of suffering as a Jinchuuriki. But you are still right here, and you became a ninja despite all of it. Even your dream to become Hokage deserves only praise and support."

"I want you to understand this so we can prepare for it, and ensure nothing happens that will endanger you, the crew we are travelling with, or anybody at all. But that can only happen if the both of us work on it together. Do you understand?"

Naruto didn't reply at first. Pure awe could be written on his face, even facing the ground for a long time. Kakashi decided to be patient as the minutes passed by.

"Sensei.... I..." Naruto's voice cracked under the pressure. The maelstrom within him was compressed beneath a mask. Looking up, he gave a fake smile. "I guess I shouldn't talk about things being fair to you. With you Sasuke, Sanji-senpai, or Nami around. They lost people just like you, too, and hurt a lot." After this, a new look of sheer determination and will came into Kakashi's sight, sending him for a ringer by recalling the same from the young Jinchuuriki's father. "I swear I won't let that evil Kitsune out! If I have to, I'll only use him to protect our nakama, and get strong enough to make sure he stays in his cage! I give you my word. And I never go back on my word!" A fierce smile joined Naruto's pledge. Giving Kakashi more than he'd hoped for.

"I know you will," he answered. "In that case, I'll focus your training on growing strong enough not to rely on the power very much. Still, if you feel the same sensation as the one you did against Haku, then try to use only a small amount of it or come and find me immediately. For now,"-standing up, Kakashi moved directly into the middle of the clearing-"let's focus on this new jutsu I promised."

"YEAH!" The knucklehead's mood shifted on a dime, jumping high at this piece of news.

"Alright. Now, this ninjutsu is a little special, Naruto. It's an A-ranked technique and was actually invented by the Hokage himself. One of his most famous, ever."

The rest of the day brought more and more revelations for the Straw Hat Pirate Crew. Until each of them gathered by the beach. Kakashi was satisfied with Naruto's progress but had to blink after finding the sight near their ship. Nami was down on the beach, swinging around a bo-staff. Gin was up on the deck while Sakura was slumping over a chair, exhausted and sore all over. Sasuke and Zoro were the closest to them, sitting together in silence under the watch of the sun. Noticing how they were meditating, Kakashi left the pair be. Taking in the sights of the rest of their companions, until... "Huh? Where did Naruto go?" the Jonin noticed, belatedly.

"Sanji-sensei! Hey, Sanji-sensei! Sanji-sensei, I'm back and ready! Come on out, ya know! I want to get some more Black-leg training!" Naruto was up in the Merry's Crow's nest, scanning the beach with his eyes covered, impatient to start with his second instructor.

"Naruto!"

"Yeah, Kakashi-sensei?" the boy called down to his teacher. "I'll take care of finding Sanji. For now, Sasuke and Sakura completed a certain exercise that you haven't finished yet; so, they're a little more along in that way than you are."

"WHAATT!" A flurry of orange shot down the mast, over the deck and suddenly was pouting in front of Kakashi. "What is it, sensei! I can't let Sasuke get ahead of me, believe it. I gotta be strong to help him and help our crew. What is this new thing! Come on, tell me!"

With a chuckle, Kakashi gave him the instructions for running on the sand, leaving the jinchuuriki to shoot off without his sandals on and went up hopping around the sun-burnt sand. After throwing the footwear back towards him, Kakashi moved towards the ship; finding Ussop reading through a newspaper and his kunoichi student draped across a lawn chair.

"Sakura," moving over towards her, he took a place by the railing near the chair. "I hope that sparring with Gin went somewhat well."

"Ghhhhhhhr. Sensei, I'm sore all over, and in the worst kinda ways," a croak came past her lips. Sure enough, the girl was covered with bruises and contusions, her muscles taunt and only taking shallow breaths with each word.

"Try to breathe deeply and tell me how it went," her teacher coached her.

Following his advice, Sakura recounted how things had gone. "At first I managed to get around him well and landed good kicks. Suddenly though his style changed. I couldn't touch him at all, sensei, and any form of taijutsu I used was met with a sharp hit on my wrists, knees, and elbows. I got around that with the substitution jutsu at first and even used several of them to try and bait Gin. But he saw through that and grabbed me by my hair.

"I tried to kick him in his groin from there but he held me out of range and was just too strong, sensei. Still, Gin actually nodded, and said it was a good idea to use dirty tricks like that if I had to."

Nodding at this news, Kakashi noticed how Naruto was cruising back across the sand while Sasuke and Zoro remained unperturbed.

"Keep going Sakura. Is there anything else?"

"Well," pulling herself up, Sakura managed to sit up, blushing somewhat at her teacher. "I did use the clone-jutsu to make copies of myself, then channelled a small amount of chakra to my feet to dash in, giving a strong black-leg kick to his face. But sensei, Gin just stumbled with it and was still able to fight. A short while from there, I ran into a low amount of chakra and became too tired to use any more taijutsu. From there, things went so bad that Gin decided to end things, and I lost the spar."

Shuffling her feet and looking downcast, shame was clear to see in the girl's form. Embarrassed at think of how she'd failed her sensei, Sakura retreated into her own thoughts.

'If that really had been a true enemy, I wouldn't be able to help Sasuke-kun or Na... or Naruto at all. I got a few good hits in, but Gin shouldn't be any more than a highway bandit from nearby Konoha. That was all the success I was able to make at all, fighting on my own.'

"Sakura!" Kakashi's tone shook the girl out of her slump, finally noticing the gentle hand on her shoulder. "You made a good effort then, and the strategies to use the jutsu in your arsenal are not something to be ashamed for. I know you aren't a heavy-hitter like Zoro, Sasuke, Sanji, or myself. But that doesn't make you a weak ninja at all.

"You discovered an important lesson today. You do have limitations, but how we work within those limitations can be what determines our success. You were successful in Cocoyashi Village working beside Johnny, Yosaku, Ussop, and Nami. Teamwork like that is critical, and something I value the most about any skills a ninja can have. Still, there can be times when you become forced to fight separately. And that is what we are preparing for right here."

Looking up, Sakura could feel relief flooding through her heart; Kakashi's praise went a long way to lift her spirits, with a noticeable change.

"Now, taijutsu is evidently your weakest branch of ninja arts right now, and your chakra levels are too low to last very long in a fight. Think back towards the spar right here, and think of what you could develop to stand a better chance in it, then focus on applying those skills to go forward."

Leaving her to her thoughts, Kakashi moved across the caravel to the shoreline. Jumping from the railing, he took a breath before resuming his own training regimen.

Evening came around to find Sasuke and Zoro hanging in a tree, Zoro by his knees and Sasuke with chakra at his feet, doing sit-ups.

Shirtless.

Sakura had hearts in her eyes at the sight, swooning over her crush, his sweating form highlighted by the sunset.

Luffy also stood near the beach, while a cloud of dust dissipated to reveal he was alone. "Huh! Where? Darn, where did Old Man disappear too!?" Shifting left and right, even crouching down and lying back, the rubber man didn't find any trace of the ninja. "Come on, are you Old Man?"

Suddenly, Luffy's ankle was seized from underground. "I am where you least expect it, Captain." Jarringly, Luffy found himself neck-deep in the sand, stretching his neck around to face the Grey-hound holding his hat.

The Jonin had taken over for Sanji as Luffy's training partner, and despite outclassing him decisively could not help but become impressed with the Devil-Fruit user's grit, ingenuity, and endurance. Placing the hat back on his crown, Kakashi stood up with a badly needed stretch. "Why don't you try and get out for a while, and I'll take a break on-board the ship."

Leaving him behind with stars in his eyes, Nami handed him a glass filled with water back aboard the Merry. Ussop and Gin were doing their own practice together in a contest for who was the better shot. Sanji and Naruto also came out from the tree line.

"You did good learning today, Naruto," Sanji praised him once they reached the group. "For now, let's get back to the kitchen and prepare some dinner for everyone."

"Foooddd!" a shout rang across the beach. "Yeah, Sanji, meal-time! Come on, I'm starving right here. I need a lot of meat to get my strength back!"

Sanji couldn't obey; fixed in place with a cigarette dropping from his mouth. "Ghu-Hahahahahahaha!" Naruto even fell over, rolling with

both arms wrapped over his middle. "Looks like sensei got you really good, Captain. Believe it!" Naruto laughed.

"How can you find this funny, Naruto! Our captain lost his head.... okay, he literally did this time!" Sanji admonished him, with a second to correct his statement over their crazy captain.

"It's fine, dumb-ass-cook!" Zoro called from his place in the tree. "Kakashi just yanked him under the sand to trap him in place. Hurry up and cook before that endless pit in his stomach steals dinner from everyone."

Taking this hint without even a comeback, Sanji nodded and was inside the kitchen moments later. Naruto was behind him, finding the cook with hearts in his own eyes, swooning over Nami at the table. Quickly enough, sandwiches were brought out to the beach where the crew gathered for a bite.

"Hey, Sanji!" Naruto called over.

"Yeah?"

"Today, Ussop and Luffy talked about going to the Grand Line. Is it really your goal to find this Great Blue Place and cook everything there?"

The chef shook his head, smiling at the idea of his own dreams. "You're off by a bit, Naruto. My goal is to find someplace, but not the Great Blue. It's called the All Blue." Some of the Straw Hats paused a moment, listening to Sanji talking about the Legendary place; a spot nowhere on any map, where all fishes of all types could be found. "It's a chef's paradise; one so amazing that many write it off as a myth, but it'll only be that way until someone proves it's real. And that's what I'll do."

"Oh," Sasuke scoffed at this news. "If that's what you wanted, then why waste time to start looking for it? You kept saying 'no' to Luffy at

the Baratie, giving any excuse to stay with Zeff all the time. If this was so crucial, why not go for it the first time he kicked you out?"

"Yeah! What gives Sanji? I had to keep asking and asking and asking before you finally left!" Luffy demanded.

Sanji fell silent again; thinking back to the most crucial days of his life: the vessel Zeff's crew attacked, the storm that followed, and one critical moment with a near-living skeleton with only thin grey skin on his bones.

Taking a breath from his cigarette and looking around, the chef made a choice. Sanji began talking, sharing his first attempt to find the All Blue by joining a ship, the Orbit, as a trainee chef. About Zeff's attack on the boat and the storm that ensued. How the old man saved his life, then of having a tiny sack of food while Zeff kept a giant one to himself.

Kakashi remained stoic, while Sakura's mouth hung agape and Gin even had to blink. "S-S-S-Sanji. Chef Zeff really saved you like that?" the kunoichi asked him.

"I think you're wrong!" Naruto exclaimed, drawing glares from everyone in the room. "The Chef always talked about giving people food, not hoarding it! Believe it! There's no way he'd give you a tiny bit and keep a giant sack to himself. You've gotta be remembering it wrong, Sanji!"

Listening closer, some people picked up the denial in his voice. Gin even started pondering it. 'The kid's right. Dat don't sound like the old Chef acted a'tall.'

"Well, he did, Naruto." Sanji continued. "I took it over to the other side and didn't see the old man for a while. Even moving around would waste energy and bring death that much closer."

"At first, I rationed everything out for 20 days; thinking that something would come along before then. At that time, I felt

guaranteed that a ship would pass by and spent the nights smiling out at the sun. Slowly... those 20 days went by. More followed." A long pause came between each sentence; tempered with an agonizing despair.

"Weeks.... a month.... I...." Sanji leaned back, his face to the ceiling, one hand slipping over his stomach.

"I started eating less.... food.... the feel of something in my mouth. It became more precious than air at the bottom of the sea." A pause followed this. "The 25th day came. That was the one I ran out on." Sanji's hand came before his face, grasping the memory clear as glass. "One, single, mouldy loaf of bread. That was all leftover of what I had."

Most of the crew had recoiled from their cook. Gin swallowed, hard; the weakness and the agony that came with hunger were still fresh in his mind. Nami's lips were trembling, recalling dangerous nights where she'd been unable to steal a scrap, or Arlong denied her anything to eat; all the worse from recalling the last argument with Bellemere, starving herself to ensure her girls ate their fill.

Naruto was barely holding back tears. Recalling how he'd seen families eating together in his village, and nobody around for him. Even lying on a bed at home on a sunny day, his stomach groaning out with nobody and nothing around.

Sanji lit a smoke and then continued. "I dropped it over the side after my grip fell from a painful wrack from my cursed stomach came with a painful wrack. That bread was worth more than a country to me at that moment, and losing it was torture.

"From there, all the days just... I couldn't count them any longer. Water, a kind we could drink, was still there. But... My clothes become bigger. An empty... dark... torturous pit replaced any feeling in my stomach. Dust was the only thing my mouth could feel.

"And still there was no sign of any ship, people, not even birds up above. Rain, clouds, sunlight, all of it came and went. Months went by. I was closer to a skeleton than a boy.... couldn't even walk anymore.

"I never saw the Geezer once. So, I thought he was dead and crawled over to see."

More continued, of Sanji's decision to kill Zeff and take the giant sack beside him. Of how it fell open, filled only with gold, treasure, and more. Even Nami had to gasp, giving no thought towards the money in light of where it was found in.

"So.... he gave all of it to you?" Kakashi spoke up; the most disciplined one in their midst. "You said beforehand that only two sacks were there; the food he put aside and gave to you, and a second larger one. The old man didn't eat anything."

Sanji nodded. "Strange, isn't it? We had all that money and were starving with nothing to gain with it. All of it was worthless."

Raising his head, Sanji met everyone's eyes, sending their instincts screaming to run. "Next thing I did was shake the Geezer. That was how I saw he was missing one leg. I demanded to know what happened to it." Shifting his eyes to the table, the chef needed several breaths from his smoke to convey this piece of news.

"'I was hungry.' When I asked about his leg, that was his answer. He used a sharpened rock to cut off his own leg; the only thing he ate in that time." [4]

Sakura's scream caused the ship to shake, and the girl hit her limits. Naruto was lost for any words or thoughts. Sasuke had become white, trying to force himself not to throw up. Gin was shaking, Zoro was frozen, as was Luffy. Ussop and Nami couldn't make a sound.

Kakashi couldn't move, both his eyes wide enough for one to edge out from under his headband. Turning that revelation over in his

mind, he failed to imagine someone from Konoha doing the same for their own team, even his own sensei.

"That Geezer. He gave all the food he'd recovered to me. I owe my entire life to him, and the greatest lesson I will ever have. When I asked him why, he said he'd had the same dream as I do. The All Blue."

Finally, so much made sense to the Straw Hat's about Sanji. A short explanation followed, of their rescue and opening the Baratie together.

"Whoa!" Naruto exclaimed. The boy was shaking, his arms curling at his hips. Then he exploded with excitement. "Zeff is so awesome! He's the ultimate guy! Sanji-senpai, please, please, please! Teach me to be like him, and all the stuff you learned from him!"

Most of the group could only smile at this reaction, Kakashi even shaking his head at Naruto's single-minded habits. Sanji shared a grin at his upside-down nakama. "You really want to learn everything I got from that Old Man, Naruto?"

"Yeah-yeah-yeah!" the whiskered Genin nodded. "Teach me everything you learned from him! Even how to fight and how to cook! Can you do that, Sanji-sensei?"

Sanji thought it over, while Kakashi himself did the same.

'These two really have hit it off together, even since we arrived at the Baratie. Naruto especially took to learning that Black-leg style more than Sakura or Sasuke. It is certainly a practical method for ninjas like us to have and Naruto certainly needs an overhaul for all of his baseline skills. This might be a good substitute for conventional taijutsu.'

Whilst the Jonin sensei was debating these possibilities, Sanji was looking down at Naruto, grinning. "Alright then. We'll start with

practice sessions every day from here on, Naruto. But first, there is one rule I need you to grasp."

Placing one hand on his official protégé's shoulder, Sanji took another look at his past. "That time on that piece of rock. It left me with a single revelation towards my role as a cook.

"Before all of that, I thought it was disgusting to eat leftovers or anything that another person left behind. Starving out there, all I thought of was scraping away piles worth of food, even the night before the shipwreck. My one, absolute rule from that time is to never allow any food to go to waste. I'll feed anyone who's hungry, no matter who they are or what they have done. Nobody can deserve to starve like that. Ever.

"That's the same reason Chef Zeff decided to open a sea restaurant for anyone going about on the ocean. Naruto, if you want to learn anything from me, you must always respect the duty of a chef; to feed anyone who is hungry, and to never allow even a tiny flake of food to go to waste."

A loud bang followed, calling their attention to Luffy; who stood tall and strong out from Kakashi's sand trap. "Sanji, you are a real man. And I get why you didn't want to leave back then. Old Man Zeff saved you as Shanks saved me. Now, we'll find this Big Blue you both want to find and head to the Grand Line!"

Nami, Sasuke, and Ussop each smacked their heads, while Gin, Sakura, and Kakashi let out one simultaneous sigh. Still, Zoro and Naruto nodded.

"Believe it, Sanji-senpai! And if I can make food really, really good, Sakura-chan might even say yes to a date with me, ya know."

Sanji stopped cold. "You want to charm a lady and treat her properly, too?" Straightening his suit, Sanji strode over to his new official pupil, with one hand raised. "Naruto, if that is your goal, then we will get started right now. Get to the kitchen!"

"Awesome!" Naruto bolted. "What do I get to make first?"

"Hhhhh. Not so fast, kid." The chef was still close behind him, and pointing at the used, dirty kitchen space. "If you're aiming to learn how to cook and how to fight, then the first step is the dishes." Spreading his arm across the table, the cook then tapped his foot down.

"Never leave a kitchen filthy for someone else to come and find later. The last thing we do at any time is tidy every centimetre of this kitchen space. Start gathering them up, and I want to see my face shine in each one before you can learn anything about fighting or cooking."

Naruto tried to complain before a solid kick to the noggin set him to the job. The rest of the night witnessed Nami and Sakura in the bath together, Gin asking Kakashi about a certain orange-covered book, while Zoro and Sasuke continued meditating. Once he was satisfied, Sanji and Naruto were back on deck practising black-leg style with Naruto learning to hold a hand-stand and improve his balance. Until the watch was drawn and most fell to sleep.

The Straw Hat remained there on the island for four days, either in preparation or relaxation. Zoro set several different exercises out for Sasuke that left the prodigy at his limits, and Sakura still tried experimenting to find what different fighting methods were the most practical, for herself and the crew. Naruto himself had it the hardest of the lot, stuck with dishes and kitchen jobs any moment he wasn't training. He'd complained about wanting to make food and giving it to the crew, especially Sakura, yet Sanji had none of it. Even giving kick after kick to Naruto's head every time he made a mistake in the kitchen. The chef was a strict teacher, recalling exactly how he had been educated and holding nothing back.

Meanwhile, Sakura made the broadest leap by coming to Gin with a surprise.

"You want to learn howda use a tonfa?"

"Yes, Gin," the kunoichi replied, her arms folded back, head straight, mustering her full commitment. "After our spar, Sanji's Black Leg style takes too much out of me to use without some heavy chakra use, and I'm still working on learning new jutsu. I think that using a weapon like Miss Nami, Zoro, and you would be useful to me. I thought about a bo first, but I'd need to drop it completely to use the hand signs for other moves. If I had one tonfa, maybe I could strap it somewhere or pull it out again when I need to in the middle of a fight. Plus, they... really hurt a lot when they connect." She rubbed her side delicately.

After wincing at the sore spot, she swallowed and lifted her head to face Gin square-on. "Naruto is learning from Sanji, and Sasuke-kun trains a lot with Zoro. Nami isn't a dedicated fighter like you, and I want to learn how to use that weapon. Please," bowing her head towards him, Sakura made her plea. "Teach me how to fight better, and to use tonfa's."

Gin pondered this, before looking over at Kakashi. His nod came a moment later. "All'righ, Sakura. I'll warn ya, Ah've nevah been teaching before. This'll be hard on ya, kid, but Ah'll teach ya my own methods, the Man-demon style.

"Heh!" the former Krieg pirate gave a smirk at his own name. "Guess we'll have ta rename it. Daemona's Dance, or some'in. Still, Ah'll have to getcha yer own tonfa's, plus a matching replacement for mine so we both have matchin' sets. We'll take care of that in Loguetown."

Kakashi continued working with his students on their jutsu repertoire. Naruto surprised everyone by learning his new technique the fastest.

"Whahooooooooo! I did it! I did! I did it!"

"Indeed, Naruto," Kakashi smiled at his student. "You officially completed the baseline stage of this jutsu. I thought it would be

perfect for you to learn. Especially since you have the first stage complete." Naruto spun around, a happy look on his face as the rest of the crew gathered about

"Hey! Hey, hey, hey show us!" Luffy excitedly pleaded. "Come on. Come on show us this mystery-power you got Naruto. I bet you it'll be awesome. Shishishishishishishishishishishishishishishishi."

"Hm. I actually want to know too Kakashi," Ussop joined in. "What did you teach Naruto? And what's so big about it?"

"What's so big!?" Sakura cried out, finally getting her voice back. "Ussop, Naruto learned something faster than we did. At the Academy, he was the worst student in our class. I can't believe he can learn anything this fast."

"There may actually be an explanation, Sakura," Kakashi spoke up, ever the enigma. "A head start can often bring the finish line that much closer. Naruto, why don't you show everyone what you learned?"

"No way!" the boy cried out folding his arms in an X. "Nu-ah, no, no, no. It's a big surprise for when we run into another fight, sure, but I wanna keep this secret for another sparring match with Sasuke. That's why I kept practising it away where nobody would see me."

Ussop and Luffy fell flat on their faces, before jumping up and to hound Naruto. Going on and on while the cabin-Genin raced around the beach until a game of tag started from it. Kakashi and Sakura got roped in, while Sasuke and Zoro stood on the sidelines, their arms folded somewhere between scepticism and jealousy.

From then, they raised sails for Loguetown. More training continued on the way, especially on Sakura and Sasuke's part to not be outdone by their teammate. However, a storm between them and their destination stalled things for one day.

"AHHHHHH!" Naruto and Sakura both cried, feeling the boat shake around from under their feet.

"Hey, you too, keep it together," Nami exclaimed. "This storm is only a small one, but we still need all hands on deck to avoid getting capsized!"

"Huh? What do we need a cap for, Nami?" Naruto called over, while Sasuke and Kakashi were tying down anything loose on the deck.

"Turning over!" Sakura answered instead, crouching down, one arm across her stomach trying to hold back breakfast. "Capsizing means turning upside down, Naruto!"

"Oh!" The boy actually turned pale at this idea, until a laugh of all things came from the bow.

"Shishishishishishishi! We're doing great Nami. That'll never happen with you as our navigator, so why worry!"

Rain was coming down hard, too much for the rest to see Nami blushing at this praise. The ninjas held tight to the boat with their chakra while Gin and Zoro stayed on deck with their sea legs alone. The entire ship jarred with a sickening, harsh tear.

"The Haul is broken!" Ussop's shrilling report came up from below deck. There's a tear in the wall of the boy's room!"

"Oh no! Not-"

"Naruto, come down here with me!" Nami's exclamation was silenced by Kakashi's command. Immediately, the Genin was with his sensei down the ladder to the room. Inside, Kakashi was already weaving hand signs.

"Water-style: Water-wall Jutsu!" A stream coming through the wooden wall suddenly began shifting, moving from the floor of the room back outside the opening. "I'll hold this leak stable. Naruto, get

at least 20 copies out here in a human chain to the storage room. Working with Ussop to make a patch job over top of this tear. Now!"

Nodding, Naruto made his clones quickly grab all the materials, while Zoro and Luffy were working over the sail and Gin took the helm with Nami. Soon enough they had the leak repaired and Kakashi was back on deck. Under Nami's directions, they continued to work hard until a single ray of light came into view.

"There it is! The eye of the storm! Come about inside of it and we'll stay there until it dissipates," the Navigator ordered. The entire crew complied, and the seas became quiet and still. Zoro, Kakashi and Sasuke tied off the lines while Sakura and Ussop both fell over, one over the side.

"Sakura!"

"Ghhk-Naru, don-Blllleeaaahhhhh!" the Kunoichi emptied her gut over the side, the slightest relaxation forcing her shaking stomach to betray her. "Huh.... uhhhhhh."

Nami blinked, watching the boy stand beside his sea-sick teammate at a total loss. "Naruto, try holding back Sakura's long hair, and rub her back until she stops."

Nodding, the boy followed her directions, sliding one hand around Sakura's face the hold her bangs behind her shoulders, then clumsily trying the stop all the pink strands running down her back from sliding forward. Sasuke watched the pair a moment, then walked up to the stern deck to come beside Zoro.

"Well, that wasn't so bad, except it interrupted our training today," Zoro observed, shifting away to take a seated pose. His sword resting on his shoulder, the man's knuckles came together and Sasuke mirrored him.

"Yo," Kakashi's lax daisy call announced that he was close by. "Mind if I join you too? Luffy, Nami, and the others can handle the ship."

The three warriors knelt into meditation, Sasuke remaining antsy, stiff and forceful even to an onlooker, while the others were a picture of calm and ease.

Sakura's sorry state soon passed and with a thank-you to Naruto, she came back to the other nakama.

The crew continued for the day and the following night, staying within the eye until the storm slowly lifted and clear, calm weather prevailed the next day. Enough for Luffy to start a game of tag on the deck.

"I told you, I don't have time for children's games, Captain," Sasuke growled at a certain pest.

"Come on let's play tag! It was great back on the beach, and you didn't join," Luffy pouted.

"Zoro said no so he could take a nap and Nami is busy. Naruto and Sakura are in, so come on!"

Sasuke still refused, until Luffy got impatient, running back while carrying the boy under his arm. Sasuke quickly became a game prop, with Sakura chasing after her crush to save him, making a keep-away game between Luffy, Sanji, and Naruto against Sakura. Even with a substitution, the Uchiha still got caught again with no place to stay to escape.

Kakashi had to chuckle, watching it from the corner of his eye while buried in a certain green "Tactic's," book.

"Hm? What exactly are you reading there, Kakashi?" Sanji had come to stand by his nakama and enjoy a smoke.

"Because I want to enjoy what comes next in the story. This one is part of a series in our village. It's actually a romance story written by another ninja."

"Romance?" the chef jerked, turning his full attention to the book.
"Hey, you mind if I read it one time?"

"Hmmm?" Kakashi glanced towards him, actually taking one eye off the page. Looking back between it and Sanji, he stole a glance at Nami and decided.

The Jonin reached around to his pouch, pulled out to the first volume, and spoke in a very, very low hush. "It's called Icha-Icha, with the first edition titled 'Paradise.' But do not, allow, Nami, to see, or read it."

Crinkling his eyebrow, Sanji scowled at this news. 'If anything, Nami-swan disapproves of is here, maybe I should throw it out after reading it,' he thought.

Several hours passed before Luffy began demanding food again, only to find Sanji frozen in place; above a pool of blood dropping through his nose, from a face flushed with a special shade of pink. Kakashi himself stayed in the background as everyone tried to revive the cook. "Quick, get him a lot of water and larger amounts of sugar!" Nami ordered everyone.

'This mask really does come in handy,' the pervy Hatake silently remarked. [5] As Gin took the book away first and started reading it himself. From then on, both the scoundrel and the cook had daily morning sparring to decide who would get to continue reading the new treasure they found in Kakashi's back pocket.

Within a bar at Loguetown, the patrons inside were trying to stay unnoticed; avoiding the eccentric party occupying the centre of the place. Still, two made the mistake of looking over. With a crash, a grey-beard man went flying out the window in a blood-spray, and the other waved over at a waitress.

"Ma'am?" the same attended spoke to one member of the centre stage. "Your entire meal has been paid for by a generous man. He

requested this be passed on to you."

"Oh?" a black-haired, shirtless beauty smiled.

"Hhmmmm. Another boyfriend flashily slayed by your powers, Alivida?" a certain red-nosed clown beside her questioned.

"Yes, it seems so. Still, all the free service aside, how far longer do you expect to wait until Straw Hat may come around here?" she replied with an impatient frown.

"Oh, he most certainly will. That flashy dumb-ass is headed here no doubt, either to reach the Grand Line or to see where the man he wants to surpass met his end. It's actually laughable that idiot can imagine stacking up to Captain Roger at all," her partner replied, shovelling another load into his mouth.

"Captain Roger? You talk like you've met him before, not only heard through an old ship's tale."

"Well of course I do," the red-nose man replied. "Years ago, throughout my time as an apprentice pirate, I met that incredible man in person. It's hard to see it has been 20 years since his execution happened right here. And kicked off the whole Great Pirate Era from it."

More followed, all within earshot of another man who'd run afoul of the Mugiwarra crew recently. With a thirst for blood and payback.

Another day of sailing later, the ship came in with the horizon. The docks of Loguetown held barely anyone at that hour. Few enough that nobody spotted the silhouette on a rooftop, garbed in an ink-green cloak. Around the figure, ripples were flowing about his clothes, and continued staring at a particular vessel, approaching.

'Fate must be the answer to this. Show me what destiny you have chosen for yourself, and who will stand beside you. My son.'

Right in his sight, one in his thoughts and those of the Straw Hat Crew were assembled at the Going Merry's figurehead. Watching their destination coming into view.

"That's it, huh?" Luffy asked, filled with awe and eagerness. "That is where Gold Roger was born and then executed, right?"

Nami stepped up beside him. "So, you did remember. I've gotta say, Luffy, you keep on surprising everyone here by turning into a nearly different self left and right."

"Whaddya mean? I'm always myself in everything, Nami. Now, let's go there. And then, off to the Grand Line, everyone!" he exclaimed.

Watching him, Nami smiled at this distraction; and the reminder of how Luffy had gone beyond everything to end Arlong; *'Luffy landed on top of Arlong. Standing on top of him, with eyes focused entirely on one, single task. Grabbing his collar, the Fishman was hauled to eye-level "I... will... never... let... you... HARM..... NAMI... IN... ANY WAY AGAIN! SHE IS SOMEBODY THAT I CARE ABOUT AND WILL ALWAYS BE MY NAKAMA!"'*

"You're right. And Sakura and I need time for shopping! Zoro, Gin, angle the sails to starboard, the current and wind will slide us in!"

End.

With every ending comes a new beginning. I hope Bellemere's funeral was a good surprise. And the transition to Loguetown was worth the slower pace. Also, I decided it was past-due for Naruto to receive some due attention. More will be coming in this arc, from Kakashi and more.

[1]- Arlong's encounter with Kizaru.

[2]- Ocean Guide, from One Piece Z. While not the direct English translation, the words align with Bellemere's life so, so well; even in

the very "humble hometown waters," she left to become a Marine and returned to with Nami and Nojiko.

[3]- In a set of online questions, Oda shared some day-to-day habits of all the Straw Hat crewmates. Including how often they sleep; with Zoro labelled as around 4 hours a night with periodic naps throughout the day.

[4]- Zeff's leg. This does differ between the Anime and the Manga; the former with Zeff cutting off his leg to save Sanji from drowning, while in the Manga he ate his own leg after cutting it off himself. The change came about from censorship for the audiences that TV often features, in nearly every form of the Anime. With good reason.

[5]- An authentic running exercise, especially bare-foot. I practice this personally and will swear by it for making marathon running and Muay Thai far smoother.

[6]- I maintain, this is 50% of why Sasuke lost to Itachi in the Search for Tsunade Arc. From the Nami no Kuni arc through the end of the Sasuke Retrieval Arc, he rarely employed strategy or clever tactics. Instead, Sasuke constantly employed conventional Ninja skills and his sharingan, riding the coattails of his talent to success. He escalated to more powerful techniques as a situation demand and still only applied them very directly; all of which were impressive for a Genin, remarkable for a standard Chunin, but sub-standard for Tobuketsu Jonin and above. Against Itachi and Kisame, Sasuke jumped straight to the most powerful move in his arsenal, Chidori, and ran head-first to his own defeat when Itachi predicted and deflected it. The occasion Sasuke did outfox anyone was in the Konoha Crush, when Temari let-down her guard and her caught in an explosion.

Like any 12-year-old with a lot of talent, Sasuke built his skills around his talents and aptitudes. Leaving him horribly unprepared to fight anyone who outclassed him, even only learning traditional Uchiha skills to kill Itachi; skills his brother had already mastered.

While in the Shippuden, Sasuke became more innovative and strategic with his own jutsu against Itachi and Danzo; but retained some bad habits against the Raikage.

Naruto's Agony

Chapter 18: Naruto's Agony, An

Excruciating Dream

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece.

Special Thanks to SwordoftheGods; Beta-reader for this chapter and author of Coby's Choice, the inspiration for this story.

Strap in a get ready, this chapter aims to hit you right in the heart.

Loudly, noise was everywhere around them. Calls for space, splashing waves, the tumble of wheels over cobbled stone roads, even announcers proclaiming challenges, stories, shopping deals and more. The fresh smell of the ocean mixing with people, food, chimney smoke and more came together in each and every nose.

The Going Merry came into a spot on the wharf, with Ussop explaining to the ninjas how it was called a berth, Gin leapt for the dock, Nami threw him a mooring line and a heavy splash signalled Zoro had dropped their anchor overboard. Some of the ninjas were barely standing upright from training with their tutors at daybreak. Sakura and Sasuke each had a hand on the railing while Naruto was bouncing with energy and excitement right beside Luffy; the knuckleheads leaping over the side together.

"Wha-Ohhhhhhh! This is gonna be so awesome!"

"Oh yeah, let's have a really great time here, Captain!" Naruto was shaking with excitement to find another place to explore. Hiding how deep a swirling hole was building his gut and his head.

"Well, this place truly does seem like it'll fit. Port towns always have something of everything, after all,"

"I agr....agree with you sensei," Sakura replied, sucking in a breath between her words. "And so many people... with so many shops and so....so much to see. This place almost feels like our village back at home." Sasuke and Zoro let out a shared grunt, while the others finished up with the boat.

"You know... there seem to be a lot of pirate ships here right now. More than I had imagined there would be," Nami announced to the group. Sure enough, not a few but a few dozen ship's masts had the telltale jolly rogers fluttering in the breeze.

"Hmmm. Hey, Kakashi," Gin questioned him. "Who's dat Marine ya called over th' snail to collect Arlong off the Conomi Islands?"

"Hmmmmmm..." Kakashi racked his brain. "Ah... Smoker. Genzo made the call somebody who went by Smoker pledged they'd set out that same afternoon."

"Ah see," Gin linked the dots. "Them bounty hunters Yosaku an' Johnny did say he was powerful. It's near a week since we was in Cocoyoshi village, and him bein' gone it's a good way for any pirate 'round here to step in, get ready for a voyage, and get back out again 'fore the Marines come back."

"Well, if that's the case we might have to make this stay a quick one," Sanji remarked, a fresh smoke in his lips. "Still, might take them a while to get back here or deliver the fishy maggots to somewhere good enough for transport to Impel Down. We might have a few days, but nothing more than that."

"Well, we could just ask them," Kakashi slipped in. Everyone turned over, making him blush with the attention. "I did ask Genzo how to use those snail things. And kept the number for the one he used and a little nudge that Genzo... appropriate it from Nezumi's ship. We could send a message back to Cocoyoshi asking if the Marines have left yet, after finding someone willing to let us use theirs."

"Well, I'm gonna find where they kill people." As ever, Luffy's claim left his crew confused. "I gotta see where the King of the Pirates was executed." He tried running off, with Ussop and Sanji scrambling to stop him before the Rubber-man fell flat on his face. Looking up, he felt something thin and sharp around his ankles.

"Why not wait a moment," Kakashi shamelessly asked him, pinching an end of ninja wire in his fingers, while Sasuke held the other end. "I think each of us need to choose a place to meet up first,"

"That's right," Nami replied. She was forcing the mental picture of the Arlong pirates locked up out of his head, with ideas for shopping.

"But Old Man," Luffy complained, "you and Nami are the smartest out of anyone in this whole ocean. You both can do fine, and everyone was talking about wanting to shop and stuff. I don't need anything like that, so why stay around if none of us are going to leave the town without the ship?"

For 3 long moments, some even caught themselves nodding their heads at the idea... from... 'Did Luffy just think about something that wasn't his stomach?' Ussop tried to comprehend the impossible, alongside most of the group while the ninjas and Gin were more thoughtful.

"There might be one short-comin', Don Luffy," Gin brought up. "With all th' cut-throats roaming here, I wouldn't put it past 'em to try and steal our ship. A Caravel like the Merry's a fine vessel to have anywhere on this ocean."

"No! No way! Nobody is going to steal the Merry!" Ussop shouted, horrified.

"Like how Nami did from you back at the restaurant, Ussop?" Sasuke inquired.

"Hey, that was in no way my fault!" the sniper denied. "She tricked me with feminine wiles, and by that note, Sanji shouldn't be trusted either. He'd let any girl give'em a flash one second and steal our Merry the next one!"

Nobody could deny that, Sanji himself said nothing; the silence owed to a crimson trickle down his face at thoughts of a scene in his new favourite book.

Nami meanwhile made a few glances before painting on a cute smile, her hand forming an "okay" sign. "You all can forgive me for that little matter, right? I even forgave any debts you owed me over getting my home in more trouble."

"Gin does bring up a good point," Kakashi observed, rubbing his mask with one finger. At his feet, Luffy kept squirming to get his legs untied. "Taking down our flag might avoid announcing that we are a pirate crew either. Then, perhaps taking shifts to guard the boat would go a long way."

"Hey, I got something for that, sensei!" Naruto was waving with excitement, both his hands crossing in a signature move. "Shadow-clone jutsu!" In a flash, one dozen Naruto's were scattered across the Going Merry; four in the stern, five in the centre, two in the lookout, and one right beside Luffy's seat.

"Yeah, we'll all watch the ship together," the platoon declared.

"No matter how many times you see it, it never fails to amaze you," Sanji grinned over at the show. "Heh, I guess you can be right about one or two things, Sanji," the first mate nodded with his own smirk.

"I think I'll still stay behind with those of you, Naruto," Gin decided, looking up at the ones on their boat. "Pulling down the colours won't do much, Kakashi. In truth, it might give others more incentive to raid us if they got no deterrent. I've got a bounty on my own head and might bring attention from any hunters in this town, as well. If the spare Naruto's an' Ah stay here 'till morning, we can sleep on board with the same night-shift routine."

Everyone nodded, with Sasuke and Sanji volunteering since they were the next up on the roster.

"Alright!" Nami announced, setting her foot down. "We have too much shopping to do here, and too little day-time to do it in! Hey, Sakura, Sasuke, Naruto. Are all of you ready?"

"Hmmm."

"Yeah, believe it Nami! I'm ready to stop standing around here!"

"I hope this trip sounds nice, and I can buy those tonfa's Gin talked about." Each of the Genin replied.

"Hey, Nami. Mind if I join the four of you too?" Zoro stepped up. "I'm in need of some new swords, and this town should have a swordsmith somewhere."

"Maybe we'll be a party of five," Kakashi announced. Reaching to a jacket pouch, the Jonin also pulled a specific scroll. "My students and I should replenish our kunai and shuriken wherever we can. Gin told me a few weapon shops might have some for sale. All of this might cost quite a bit of money, though. And I have something that might offset the costs."

Another second later, smoke billowed from the scroll, and Arlong's iconic Saw-blade was resting on Kakashi's shoulder. "I kept this after Arlong Park fell down, and a few other things from Arlong's money room. Selling them to a weapons shop or trading near a bank might net us a bit of cash for all of this shopping. Do you agree Nami?"

The navigator herself swallowed, a rock dropping down her stomach; recalling the many repulsive crimes she'd seen the ugly weapon bestow. Until a hand fell on her shoulder. "Hey Nami? You okay? Maybe do you want me to break that sword?"

Luffy got back to his feet when Kakashi let go. Now he eyed his navigator carefully, honest black eyes searching her foggy brown ones. As their orbs met, his touch eased her, letting the fog of horror clear with reassurance. The girl let out a sigh, sliding a finger around her collar. 'It....is today hotter than normal? I think I'm sweating a bit.'

"Yeah, I'm fine Luffy," her voice stronger now, filled with confidence that wasn't present moments before. "Kakashi is right, selling that old thing should get some extra. Plus, since he and Zoro are the strongest ones here; they can carry all the clothes and accessories me and the Genin need!" Neither of the two men looked eager for this condition, but Luffy got excited again.

"Yeah, I told you Nami and Kakashi can handle anything!" Now turning on his heel, the airhead was off before anyone could stop him that time. "See ya! Have fun shopping! I'll meet you at the execution stand; or some place where food will be!"

"Hey, wait. Luffy!" "Don Luffy!" neither Nami nor Gin could stop it before he turned around an alley; Sanji was still too stuck in his pervy mind to notice the by-play between the pair, while Zoro and Ussop were distracted with a second orange blur. "I'm coming with you, Captain!"

"Naruto!" Sakura called after him, both wild boys vanishing around a corner.

"You, don't need to worry," Kakashi promised the group. "Naruto can look after himself and is good at escaping trouble. But just in case," With two fingers, a shadow clone of Kakashi appeared then vanished in a blur. "My own shadow-clone will follow those two and send a warning if a ruckus starts to build. Trouble somehow seems to draw around Luffy like bees to honey."

"And we all have the scars to prove it," Sanji muttered dryly, pulling himself together. "Alright. Ussop and I have a shopping list of produce to keep the Merry well-stocked. Keep an eye on Nami, and let's enjoy the sights."

"Whaa-hoo! Hey Captain Luffy, I'm comin' with you!" Naruto barreled down the street, practice letting him weave around the crowds with ease.

"Oh, now where is that boy running to?" A voice trailed behind him. "Not sure, but he seems happy. I guess he's friends with the other one who blew on by."

"I hope they both stay safe," a third person spoke, while Naruto slowed down; still listening. "I wouldn't want them to get hurt by all the pirates swarming here now."

"Such energetic kids are a good sight. That blonde one especially; I'm certain he's a nice child."

Naruto heard every word, his mouth dropping under the weight of a growing wonder. Looking around, he heard more. Saw more as people walked by.

Nobody noticed him. Nobody glared or whispered. Those who did find him looking around... they smiled. They waved. Some moved around him as he looked on down the road until one bumped in.

"Oooofffffhhh!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." With that, Naruto fell into shock; the person who'd apologized, looked down at him from beside a stack of crates in the man's arms. "Guess I wasn't watching close enough. I'm sorry for colliding with you like that. Hey, you aren't out here alone, are you?"

"Naruto!" Luffy's shout rang through the pair; he was just up ahead, turning about to flash his trademark grin.

"Come on Naruto! I want you here with me!" Throwing back one arm to yank his nakama forward, the captain missed something critical.

Naruto's legs gave out, only the rubber arm keeping him from the low dirt.

'I want you here with me!' I want you here with me!' The boy had to throw his head aside, violently.

'Wh....what is this....this awful feeling?' Naruto asked, one hand planting itself between his chest and tummy. It felt as if, a revolting void crawling through him with spindly barbed legs. Naruto's head felt light, his chest scrunching together with sharp edges, a 20-pound, sour lead weight sat in his throat. He was seeing dark spots blotting up his vision. Now his body barely felt anything, all the weight and turbulence were centred in his head, crushing his mind to fragments...'No, I don't like this. I don't want to feel this. What is going wrong with me? I never felt this back in the village.'

"Yeah!" Another happy cry pierced his ears; Naruto looked up, seeing Luffy grinning still. With a strength of will even the great Monkey D. Luffy couldn't fathom, Naruto pushed all his feelings aside; and focused only on a person.

"Hey, Captain, so where are we going?" Huh, huh? Is-is it this way!" His feet back on solid ground, Naruto pointed to one alley and took off runny. Luffy followed, chasing Naruto down each and every turn. The pair wove through the streets, one excited for adventure; the other desperate to keep moving, keep getting away from whatever he felt.

Naruto could literally push the maelstrom inside him back with every step he ran, still laughing, still smiling at how he avoided feeling it.

It took some hours before he was running down again and got yanked to a stop. "Huh?"

Looking back, he saw Luffy with a plain, bland face watching him.

"Captain Luffy, come on! We gotta find this gallows-place remember? Let's keep moving, keep going!" Naruto cried, his face twisting now as the bad feelings came back through him the longer he stayed in one place.

"Uh... Naruto. I think it's this." Jabbing his thumb to the left, Luffy turned to look while Naruto finally noticed what was around him instead of just feeling it through instinct. Sure enough, they were inside a broad open square, with one wide platform capped atop a high, iron tower in front of a hall.

"Whoa....." Naruto finally stopped; the awe and amazement washing anything else from his mind away. He felt the rush of Luffy pulling him in, swaying before the older teen's arm returned. Both boys stared straight up at the tower, and the stockade on the platform.

"This is it? This guy. Gold Roger. That last King of the Pirates. This is where the guy you want to surpass died, Captain Luffy?" Naruto spoke solemnly.

"Yeah." Luffy had spent the days between the crew's Uchiha revelation and this moment talking about Roger, Shanks, and everything he knew about the Pirates and the One Piece.

"There it is. Naruto. You sat and listened to my stories about Gold Roger more than the others did. This really is the spot. This is where they executed the King of the Pirates. The place where the Greatest Pirate who ever lived... died."

Both boys looked up. "And it where.... where this Great Pirate Era started. Right?" Naruto questioned his partner.

"Yup."

'So. This big metal thing. It's like the Memorial Stone Kakashi-sensei showed me,' the Genin tried to make an analogy. 'Somewhere to symbols that a great being died, and their actions remind anyone who sees it that they were here.'

Both stood still for a long time. Luffy even tried climbing it, but Naruto held him back. "Captain, that's where the guy died from? If you go up there, might you die too?"

"Nope. I gotta be the King of the Pirates first, so I won't die," the rubber-brained captain promised, grasping one hand to his bicep. "Going up there means I can see what Roger saw when he died. It'll be so cool."

Luffy took off again, but while running Naruto appeared at the edge of this sight; replacing a trash bin.

"Oh, whoa, wow, cool! More mystery-switchy powers!" With him distracted, Naruto ran to block the D.'s path with crossed arms.

"Captain, if you go up there, Nami, Zoro and Sanji-sensei might not like it."

"Good thinking Naruto," a familiar voice came behind the Genin. Glancing up, he found a certain mask and wild grey hair looking down.

"Oh, Kakashi-sensei! Hi."

"Hello to you as well," the visitor replied, looking towards the Captain.

"Nami is looking for you both to do some shopping, especially Naruto after he ran off on her. Plus, just strutting up there might draw a crowd."

"No way. I wanna climb it," Luffy complained, stamping one foot for good measure. Coaxing the clone Kakashi to sigh, thinking over another solution; the former loner putting some forcibly developing people skills to work. "Well, why not I bring you back here tomorrow, just before sunrise? I'm sure the view will be better, and you'd watch the whole city come to light."

"Oh, yeah! Great idea, sensei." Naruto shouted out, turning around to run up to Luffy. Grabbing his ear, the appendage stretched for Naruto to whisper in the elongated channel.

"Captain, it'll be just like the sunrise at the Hokage Monument. All shiny and warm."

"Shinny?!" As Luffy turned his head, the ear snapped out of Naruto's fingers and went back in place. "Oh... okay then. Well, I guess we better go find Nami."

Clone-Kakashi felt a ton of bricks knock him sideways.
'That....worked....?'

"Okay, well, let's go!"

Naruto took off without a second thought. Jogging down another road, he turned left and right, then right again, even going in an obtuse square from the winding cobble roads.

All until he came to another berth by the harbour.

"Huh?"

The Genin looked left and right. He didn't see any of the crew, only dozens of ships and several times more people.

"Where did they go. Huh, I guess I got lost from them," Naruto surmised. Folding his arms, the boy looked around, then up to the rooftops.

'Oh, I'll look around up there and see where everyone is.'

Off he went; and it said something about the town that a boy leaping over the rooftops barely registered among the rouges in the streets, residents from the Grand Line, or anyone else that was staying shut inside until the Marines came back.

Naruto went further and further... all until he heard a cry.

"Whahaaaa... haaaahhuuuhaaaaaaaa!"

Looking to his left, he spied a playground where several children were gathering in a circle.

'What's goin' on?' Leaving his search on hold, Naruto went down and closer to the group.

"Hang on, Toshiro-kun. We all fall sometimes."

"Ahhh... but-but-it hurts," a young child whimpered, holding one arm covered with dirt and sand.

"Hey. Hey kid, what hurt you?" As the ground turned for Naruto, he saw through the circle how the boy was lying on his butt, nursing one arm and with a couple bruises.

"Bullies," a girl declared, pointing out across the yard. Sure enough, Naruto looked over to see a crowd of other boys leering over at the smaller ones.

"They come here and threw us off the parks.[1] The mommies and daddies aren't here when they come around, so they don't get in trouble, and hurt us whenever they wish."

Naruto glared at this. Frowning with distaste towards the other group. "Okay. Give me about 20 seconds, and those bad boys will be running out of here."

20 seconds, 10 clones, and several transformations later, the bullies were gone, booking it away from another even larger gang of guys that came charging at them. Naruto didn't throw anything to hit anyone, and the playground was liberated without so much as a punch.

"There you all go," the Genin proclaimed, smiling.

The cheers that came echoed in his ears... and pulled some old feelings back with a vengeance. Now, Naruto was... a blank.

Children came up to thank him, and others pulled him with them to join in a game of tag.

Something else was churning inside of Naruto; he just... stood there... unmoving... unsmiling.....unable to grasp something he'd wanted all his life. His face was one of loss; mouth agape, eyes smoky, nose twitching to take shallow breaths so much he was near gulping for air and could not tell at all.

The weight was back. But instead of one ugly sensation crawling through him, a pure suffering entity, Naruto felt heavy; some weight measured by the tons kept him sinking down a pit; darkness, detached from him; he couldn't feel anything....nothing....void occupied to boy's emotions on reflex straining harder and deeper than it ever had.

"Mister? Mister?"

"Huh?" Blinking Naruto looked down to find the boy who had called him down.

"Are you okay? I went to get my mommy."

It was only then that Naruto noticed a show casting over him. Looking up, the orphan found a woman unusually tall. She peered down at Naruto; with something he didn't recognize and could place... anywhere.

"Young man? Toshiro told me you were not moving and might be sick. Would you please hold still?" She knelt down, beaming with the kindness every parent should give to another child. One hand gently lifted the plate on Naruto's forehead and felt around his brow.

"Hmmmm. It doesn't feel like you have a fever, but you were very unresponsive. Why not come over and sit down on a bench?" One gentle hand came across Naruto's back, steering him towards the edge of the field. Another parent was there, listening while one child was pointing over at Naruto.

'Oh no!' his mind raced, recalling how before only pain, shouting and untold layers of spiteful eyes always ensued from this in his life. He stopped moving, his eye tightly shut; wincing for the blow to come. Pushing back a dread searing through him as a roaring fire, ready to detonate the last sliver of the mask he'd desperately been wearing for days.

"Oh? Are you feeling alright?" Slowly.... hesitatingly... Naruto opened his eyes to face the other woman.

Her smile disarmed him. "Thank you."

"Kenta was just telling how you protected him and Toshiro from a gang of hurtful boys. You really are a kind and thoughtful person. Kenta, why not go talk with this boy. He is precisely how you should act, one day."

That was it. Naruto... something inside him SHATTERED!

All at once! The clawing sensation, a twisted monstrosity of agony born from 12 years of ostracism burst from deep in his soul. The layers of depression to keep it contained shattered to slivers, leaving Naruto to literally shake all through each muscle fibre, every millimetre of skin, every tissue in his organs.

Thrashing, the boy felt his legs running; the playground and anyone there left far behind, no sound, no touch, nothing could reach him; the calls of the parents, shouts for help, or even his own chilling scream. The orphaned jinchuuriki's world became a swirling chaos of wonder, desperation, confusion, anger, terror, despair-

-he felt ill; something coursing through his stomach, chest and lungs, and all while an indescribable weight kept pounding in his skull.

Images flashed before him: of mothers in the park sharing praise, care and joy towards him. Of Cocoyoshi village where the families welcomed him for games and company; *"Mimi! Stan! It's getting late! What are you doing with that boy!"* Naruto froze, a terrified deer

caught in headlights. Some of the parents had come over to the commotion and were eyeing him and the others. Looking across them with his mind blank, Naruto blinked as each of the adults kept smiling as they strode up to him. "'Young man? Thank you for helping us on Nami's behalf," a woman smiled down, patting Naruto over his head. "I even heard you were the one who defeated Chew," another complement came, the father who spoke placing on hand on Naruto's shoulder.'

The Baratie came into his mind's eye: 'Patty the cook roping Naruto into a bear-hug, with the others joining him to praise Naruto all the while from his hard work to the popular sexy-jutsu. Naruto himself could only blush, trying to shake off their attention. "I'll never forget any of you, ever!" Naruto promised, trying the push down the strange feelings in his chest. Somewhere between a tight pain and weird happiness, these emotions were pushing for tears to reach his eyes.'

Those same strange feelings were now back, with the sharp edge of broken glass. Beyond them, back to Hamna village and Nami no Kuni; where nobody knew he was a Jinchuuriki and those he saved smiled with glee and gratitude; acknowledging him.

Beyond it all was Konohagakure. Recalling memories of nights spent within darkness itself; wallowing in terrible feelings within his own home, or waking up from nightmares to find nobody, and nothing but dark, endless lonesomeness far worse than any dream could ever become.

Another memory came: 'Naruto was looking up to see a mask he liked, when "Hey you little brat-get outa here!" Shoving him back, hard to the dirt; Naruto pulled himself up while a crowd of adults gathered around him. "I don't want you here. You're nothing but a pest!" "That kid's just a troublemaker." "Nothing but trouble." "He's a bad seed." Glowers, fear, even revulsion surrounded Naruto, all while a solid mask knocked his head back, thrown by the same man who'd shoved him.'

'Back in Konohagakure's playground, running with a group of children as their parents called and Naruto stayed back. "Freak! Why don't you die?" "I told you to stay away from that boy!"'

The scene he just had in the Loguetown park came next. "Young man? Toshiro told me you were not moving and might be sick.... Why not come over and sit down on a bench." Gently, Naruto found one hand across his back, steering him towards the edge of the field. Another parent was there, listening while one child was pointing over at Naruto.

"Thank you." Opening his eyes, Naruto faced the other woman.

"Kenta was just telling how you protected him and Toshiro from a gang of hurtful boys. You really are a kind and thoughtful person. Kenta, why not go talk with this boy. He is precisely how you should act, one day."

The contrast of both was ripping Naruto's mind apart. Until one came....deeper in his sub-consciousness than ever. 'Winter... fresh flakes... an empty pearl-white street with one little girl kneeling in the snow. "Hey. What are you doing?!" he called. Naruto, all 4 years old, waddling through the snow.[2] "What're you doing out here in the snow like this? And if you just keep crying, how am I gonna find out?" He walked up, took her hand, and pulled the girl along. Until they came to a huge house.

"I'm alone. I don't have anyone, but I never cry. For real. I never, ever cry."

Now....it happened.

Naruto stopped cold, curling down into a ball.

Somehow... he couldn't think. Couldn't describe it, or anything. Well over a decade of feelings were tearing through him. At long last....he broke his word and cried.

Horrendous, searing sobs were pouring through him. No longer denying leagues of painful truths.

'I lied. When did I ever, or who even believed me! I was feeling terrible. Now, there's people who do like me, and why could I have that back... I want....I know....I feel.....I don't...' His face pressed tighter on itself, power building deep inside him; the pure truth of his emotions drowning down the entity sealed inside him from taking power from it.

[illegible]

One, long shout. Chakra rippled through the alley, stones cracking under its blazing blue flare. Naruto let it out, then fell; slipping back into softer sobs. Letting his emotions go in one direction they never had before. Outwards, free of anything else to temper with them.

A confused mess, Naruto folded in over himself, inside a shady alleyway, all....alone. Hours may have passed and he wouldn't have known.

"Naruto?"

After Naruto and Luffy ran off, the rest of the Straw Hats still beside their ship shook their heads.

Nami whined, bringing two fingers to her forehead. "Naruto was so excited about shopping, and he dashes off at the first distraction. He can't just wear those crazy orange clothes all the time."

Resigning herself to take Naruto out later, Nami turned her full attention to herself and the other two preteens at her left and right.

Following this, the Straw Hats parted into separate groups. The larger one led by the girls, Sakura held the savings all the Ninjas had gained at the Baratie tightly. The cook and their sniper walked up one alley to track down their own orders, while Gin moved up to the railing.

"Eh, Kakashi," the Man-demon called from the deck. "Catch." A tonfa sailed through the air, with its target lazily turning about to catch with his blind-side.

"Ahhhhh..." Gin had to swallow at this surprise. "I'll need another tonfa to have a matchin' set too. Use that one for a basis, and don't forget Sakura need her own pair. I'll put a bet you know how to spot some good weapons. Before you sell th' saw-blade; maybe keepin' it'll do well for us just as much. And Zoro. This place will have plenty of sword shops to choose from. Just keep an eye on the quality of any blade you get."

Waving back, the Jonin slipped to weapon to his belt and caught up with the others. As a unit, they walked around, admiring the sights all around them down a separate street from Naruto and Luffy's. Sakura herself looked about, before letting out a squeal.

"Clothes!" Within seconds after running, Nami was right there beside her, both sliding through the door of "Robecce Clothing."

"Oh, please, not that, yet," Zoro growled, one hand on his remaining sword. "We need to get weapons here too. There has to be a swordsmith here somewhere."

"Well, while I might agree somewhat, Zoro," Kakashi spoke up, "letting those two channel some enthusiasm right here might leave them more palpable later on."

The comment aside, showing how little the Jonin, Zoro or Sasuke possibly understood about females, the three made the cardinal mistake of walking in behind the pair.

Sakura was browsing through stalls, while Nami dashed into the change rooms. The pinkette needed everything, grabbing shirts, shorts, some colourful pants, even undergarments, the last of which she discreetly snatched to avoid lingering by the sizes. Sasuke and Kakashi resigned themselves to looking through the male sections.

Nami kept parading out the changeroom curtains; the salesman flattering her with exquisite, flamboyant prose, the pile of her likes growing higher and higher. Sakura herself took more time, but Nami came over rapidly and took over.

"Oh no, that looks terrible on you! Come on!" The kunoichi went flying after Nami grabbed her shoulder. Dragging through the aisles, she set her young friend in place and held one piece up after another.

"No!... No!... Oh, Cute!... Uh-uh!... Fabulous!... Too much Green!... Far too big, you're too young for this!... I'll throw you overboard if you dare wear that!... Oh, perfect!" One after another, Nami kept sizing up Sakura like her own mannequin; and then sent her over to the changing rooms.

Sasuke was holding up one dark purple shirt. "Hm. Not bad?"

"Oh never!" The piece flew from the Uchiha's hands, Nami replaced it while searching for more. "Sakura now has her own stuff, so you need all my full attention, Sasuke. Come on!"

Faster than even he could escape, Sasuke went through Nami's garments ringer; more and more things measured up with him as she went to town with the boy.

"Black and Navy, are way too bland; you need new ones and those that won't clash with your eyes. Red, maybe some lighter colours, don't you dare touch purple, ever; your hair's too close to navy for it. Hmmmmmm?"

More and more were held up to Sasuke's neck, waist, and even beside his head. The Uchiha couldn't say or do anything, caught somewhere between bewilderment and the pang of his own mother doing the same thing while she was still alive.

Nami finally gave him his own pile and pushed him through a curtain. Both the Genin tried on several outfits and Nami added her own favourites to the pile by the desk.

"May I deliver these to your lodgings?" The clerk asked, Zoro and Kakashi paling at the thought of having to carry it all.

"No thanks. It's all a touch too, expensive for our taste. See ya!" Waving back, the Navigator took her charges through the door.

While the salesman was crying, Zoro and Kakashi were caught before jogging to catch up.

"But Miss. Nami, you said that red top looked perfect for me," Sakura whined, as Nami flicked her forehead lightly.

"It did. So now we know what to look for. You only liked that one Sakura. That's not enough. If you want to spend money on clothes, make sure it's worthwhile, and that you love it to your core. If you wear them all the time, they have to be something you totally love yourself in. Always put every care you have into each little choice. I'm going to have to trust you to make these decisions, Sasuke here is just as hopeless as any guy; grabbing the first thing he finds, then complain about it after."

Six more shops followed, with Kakashi and Zoro in the background while Nami broke her word and made her ultimate approval centre to anything the Genin had; Sasuke, she especially spoiled over to his unspoken chagrin.

By the end, The Genin each had nearly two weeks' worth of clothing and appeared like they were coming out from a hurricane. Kakashi

managed to get some utilitarian clothes that fit his personality and Zoro didn't buy anything else.

"Oooooo, Miss. Nami thank you, thank you, thank you!" Sakura professed, skipping beside her new best friend.

"You're welcome, Sakura. And don't worry, I'm sure you'll need a change of them eventually once you grow out more."

Nami walked on, before noticing someone was missing. "Huh? Sakura?" "Oh....."

A few metres back, the pinkette was on her knees, moping as she tried to hide her barely-adequate assets from view.

"Sakura? You okay?" Looking towards her sensei, the kunoichi noticed one thing in the corner of her eye.

"Huh? Oh, a bookstore!" With a turn-about fast enough to rival Jonin-class, Sakura was on her feet again and through the doorway of another shop; the others following behind her.

Within, the girl was browsing through the shelves, collecting several copies.

"Hmmmm. Any Ship of Every Era... The Rainbow Mists Volume 4... A Warrior's guide to weapons... Success of the Celestial Dragons....World Atlas of the World Government volume 90.....Oooooo!

"The Devil-Fruit Encyclopedia. No doubt, we need this." The kunoichi's stack grew larger and larger, as Kakashi clued in to what she had in mind.

'Sakura did take to learning more about this world leagues ahead of myself, Naruto or Sasuke. That comment to put her intellect to use went deeper than I'd imagined.'

"Does she really need that many books? They'll cost a fortune."
Nami whined, coming in by Kakashi's shoulder.

"Money well-spent, if it saves our lives." At the masked man's comment, Nami shot him a question with her face alone.

"A ninja must always endeavour to gather information. Sakura was reading through every book in the Baratie to learn more about the East Blue and the Grand Line after we started there. Now, I think she wants to build up on that for where we are heading to now, instead of sailing in blind."

"I'll chip in my share of the crew's treasury to pay for them."

Realization dawned on Nami, until the last detail blocked it. "Share! What are you talking about, we never agreed on that! All the others are far too fast and loose with cash; all that money is mine!... to approve of," she amended, wise enough to recognize Zoro right in the doorway.

Sakura finished up and took some 11 different volumes to the counter; needless to say, it took some convincing before Nami herself relented. Only to morph into surprise as Kakashi whipped out a scroll, wrapped it over their package, and it vanished with smoke.

Curling the now intricately designed paper, the Hatake flashed a look at the clerk. "Devil fruit. You might want to tell anyone who comes in for encyclopedias, they are dangerously real."

He walked off with a wave, Sakura jogging behind and asking for one to sort their clothes inside.

"Hey, wait a sec," Zoro spoke up. "Why'd you say that ninja pow-"

"-Shhh!" Kakashi's hand was on Zoro's mouth. "Surprise is another weapon in a Ninja's arsenal. If someone comes at me thinking I have those powers, the obvious option is to use the weakness of every

Devil-fruit. Well, the joke on them will involve rolling over on the ground dying... from laughter," the assassin amended with a smile.

The ninjas walked on, Sasuke working hard not to laugh. Zoro looked on and nodded, while Nami's eyes were tiny and petrified.

'I hope nobody on this crew will make a habit of morbid humour like that,' she pleaded.

"Okay, I've had enough!" Zoro spoke aloud, exasperated; the hand that wasn't holding Arlong's saw-blade locking down on Sasuke's arm.

"I need some replacement swords. Now! Sasuke brought up that he wants to learn how to wield one from me, too. Let's find a swordsmith's shop!"

Steering his new discipline, Zoro walked down one alley before turning through a doorway. A dark one with-

"AHH!" "PERVERTS!" "Mommy, why did those boys come into the girl's room?" "GET OUT!" Several flying shoes, one hand-mirror and a single panty were flung out the doorway, followed by the boys.

"Hey, why'd you drop in on us like that!" Zoro called back, while Sasuke dragged him off; both ignorant of the lingerie pieces stuck in their hairdos.

Even Nami had to double-take, throwing a flat look at Zoro. "How does this never fail? Sakura, now do you see why I panicked when you and Sasuke let Zoro wander around on his own?"

"Yes," the Haruno dead-panned, whilst Kakashi groan.

"That," Kakashi slid in, "was more my mistake than theirs."

"Don't repeat it," Nami warned him, stepping forward to relieve Sasuke, but left Zoro's token where it was.

"Alright. Zoro, we'll find your shop, but never walk off on your own. Never."

The group continued, Kakashi and Nami each on either side of Zoro to keep him on track; the pervert staving off the temptation to finger the lacy thong now stuck in the neck-line of Zoro's shirt; the material so thin and weightless the swordsman had no idea.

"Hm?"

"Kakashi."

"Sasuke? Do you see anything?" Following his Genin's outstretched arm, the Jonin eyed a window with several bizarre snails on display.

"Den-den Mushi? Some people call them transponder snails. Why did those catch your attention, Sasuke?" Nami inquired.

"The smaller ones. On the sign." This announcement led the party to see an oversized mannequin with one tiny shell on his wrist. 'Baby-Den-den Mushi. Messages always in hand,' was printed on a sign.

"Those look like radios we use back home. Maybe buying some could let us stay in touch if we become separated again like between Don Krieg and Arlong," the Uchiha shared his idea, before looking back to glare at his swordmaster.

"And if Zoro, Luffy or Naruto ever run off again, we can still talk them through how to get back or track them down before they stir-up too much chaos."

That sold it. Nami outpaced everyone into the store and began haggling with the owner. 30 minutes and 175,000 bellies later, they came back out with a collection; a single adult den-den-mushi in Sasuke's care while Nami held a unique basket with 10 smaller baby ones.

"No sense in spending more than we need; but that asking price for 350,000 on-sale for the set was way too unreasonable," the navigator complained.

"The money's worth it, Nami; to stop Luffy from running off, starting fights, or getting snatched by giant birds again with no trace for us to follow," Zoro reminded her.

While the ninjas grappled with this, the group moved further on until they ran into Ussop and Sanji.

"Oh, hey. Hey guys, we're over here!"

"Ussop-san. Come over here and get your snail," Sakura waved back. Curious, the cook and the sniper walked over, with a peculiar fish slung out between them and several other bags worth of oddities and supplies.

"Whoa! W-w-w-w-wait, so now we can call Luffy or Zoro if they ever bull-rush ahead or get lost again?" Ussop nearly fell over at the news.

"Well that aside, if the ninjas ever go scouting again, they can message us back about what kind of dangers are ahead. Great thinking, Sasuke," the cook complemented, while Sakura fixed his to one wrist. Meanwhile, while Nami looked back at Zoro, something was missing. Looking one as she made a face, Kakashi giggled at a certain token resting in his pocket.

'If Sanji saw that, he'd start a fight with Zoro. Better to be inconspicuous. Maybe I'll slip it into Nami's purchases.'

"Uhh, Sanji?" Done, Sakura was pointing over at the souvenir across his shoulders; a massive blue fish sporting tusks, a flimsy rod from its forehead, and wide fins.

"Oh, it's called an Elephant Blue-fin Tuna fish," the cook explained. "I won it from another cook by the harbour in a culinary face-off. Some

call it the gem of the sea. This is going to be the centre-piece of our send-off feast for the Grand Line." The cook promised.

"Yeah, and I got some awesome stuff too," Ussop declared, fiddling with a goggle-contraption over his bandana. "Hahahaha. Look at these. Cool right?"

"You didn't waste money on those, did you?" Nami asked; a sickeningly-sweet coo that left Ussop bleach-white.

"Uh-uh-uh-n-nada-ne'-NO! No Nami, I-I won them. There was a shooting contest with a bounty-hunter here called 'Daddy Masterson.' The Marines left him to keep some order here while they left to get Arlong. Since we don't have any bounties except for Gin, he wasn't interested and let me keep these after I won a shooting-contest with him."

The navigator and self-proclaimed treasurer slipped away with approval. The rest of the groups traded stories, all until-

"Hey! Hey there guys!" Luffy came running up the road.

"Luffy!" Nami shot out from the crowd, her basket of baby-den-den-mushi thrown in Kakashi's arms---exactly when the Jonin went still... his student's doing the same.

"Luffy, ~I have a present for you~" Nami's call made the boy in her crosshairs trip in a spin.

"A present. Is it meat? I'm coming!" Her captain barrelling down, Nami waited there while Sanji growled out how unfair life was for Luffy to gain such affection from Nami and not him. Zoro whacked the cook and reminded him why as Nami showed their captain the transponder snail and slid it over his wrist.

To any onlooker they could be taken as a couple; but Sasuke, Sakura, and Kakashi didn't care.

"Luffy. Where is Naruto?" Looking to the side, Nami and her captain found Kakashi looming there, the air around him growing like a telltale storm.

"Huh? He's not with you? Did you find him after we met at the Execution stand?"

At Luffy's question, Kakashi dispelled his clone only to find it had been watching them but had not found Naruto since he left.

"Something is wrong," Sasuke declared, pushing his load into Zoro's arms. The swordsman nearly dropped it, while Kakashi immediately sealed away the Elephant Blue-fin tuna fish.

"Sakura, Sasuke and I just felt a ripple. It happens when a ninja's chakra flares up, often under an intense fight. I think Naruto is caught somewhere and in danger right now," Kakashi explained to them. Nearly in an instant, nearly, the crew shifted to a far more serious mindset, while Luffy went rigid.

"No way!" he growled, one-foot stomping on the ground. "No more of my crew are gonna get in trouble with anyone unless I'm there. Everybody!"

No one moved at this reaction. Luffy was dead-serious, nearly equal to when he learned of Arlong's crimes to Nami and Ussop. "Zoro, don't come with us, you'll get lost. Split up, everyone; Ussop, take Sasuke, walk to Zoro to the Merry then get Gin and start looking! Nami, Sanji, Kakashi you guys go look now! Sakura, you come with me!"

Reaching out with one arm, the pinkette left her load behind while Luffy took off running. "Feel where Naruto's mystery-power came from! Everyone, call on the snails when you find Naruto! Go!"

Within seconds, their captain disappeared around the corner; with Sakura under one arm and the others left in shock.

'Did Luffy just take charge of something? And give good orders?' Nami's head was swimming.

'Wow. Never seen him act like this before," Zoro mused. 'Good thinking, captain. This way one ninja will be with us to follow where this chakra-flare-thing came from.'

"Come on Sasuke, let's get going," Ussop took Sasuke's hand and Zoro's with his other one and took off for the Merry.

Kakashi shook himself, gathered-up all the new acquisitions and looked over at Sanji and Nami.

"Follow me." With that command, the man broke in a run, with the cook and navigator hot on his heels. The trio wove through the streets as Kakashi's finer attention and experience traced the final signs of Naruto's chakra-flare.

'That was almost like back on Tazuna's bridge. But it does feel like his chakra, not the Kyubi's. What could have left such an outflare so intense? Often emotional distress or a single intense burst develops this kind of effect, to anyone under Kage-level anyway. Naruto...'

Fewer minutes than fingers on a hand passed by, and it was all too long for Kakashi's preference. Gradually, he led Nami and Sanji to a playground, looking left and right.

"Kakashi, where is he? Can you feel him at all?" Nami demanded, worried in her own right.

"No, but I do have other ways," he answered, turning one nose up to the air. "Hmmm. He was certainly here, right in this spot. Something drew him further into the park....but...."

Turning to his right, the man was jogging slower, determined not to sway even a fraction from Naruto's scent. This continued all the way to an alley, one with cracks in the cobbled street and buildings,

common as cobb webs, lighter scars dancing with wilder patterns the further in you looked.

'Oh no,' Kakashi stopped there, while an orange blur went out beyond him.

"Naruto?"

Right there, inside the alleyway, Nami found the missing Nakama on the ground. His entire body twitched at her call, looking up inch by inch. Crimson swelling with shades of blue brighter than she'd ever imagined sent another shock through Nami.

"N-Na...." his voice croaked hoarsely; Nami shot off her feet to Naruto's side.

"What happened? How did you become-are you hurt?" Softly as she could muster, the girl pried Naruto's arms apart to look him over. After finding he hadn't any obvious wounds, she looked back towards him.

Now Naruto's eyes were wide. Behind her, Kakashi and Sanji were still there with faces defining worry and care.

"Bhwa-huha-hugu-AHHHH!" Nami almost rocked over at the force colliding with her. Bewildered, she caught her bearings again as Naruto's arms were wrapped around her middle in a grasp not even the strongest man alive could break. He buried his head to her chest, moving both arms more and more and more to try and press further into something; acting like she were the last sliver of life he could grasp from the hands of Death.

Confused, Nami took the obvious and hugged Naruto back. At her gesture, he achieved the impossible by crying harder than before. Nothing made sense to Nami, her own shifting causing Naruto to fight against it and hold tighter.

'WH.....what could have gone on here? He wasn't hurt but I never have seen anybody this distraught.'

As moments went by, she found that he grew less volatile the more she accepted him. So, the girl resigned herself and tucked his head beneath her chin, folding herself around to shield Naruto against whatever had caused his torment.

Kakashi looked on, even more lost than the others.

"Old man. What the hell is with him!" With those words, a single hand seized Kakashi by his jaw.

Turning him around, Kakashi let the cook back him into a wall while Sanji left his hand raised to handle things, not his feet.

"How much has that boy suffered? What could have caused Naruto to become this emotionally distraught?!"

Hidden from everyone inside his mind; Sanji's own memories were stirring. Of another blonde child spilling tears everywhere from behind an iron mask; for them to build even stronger as....

"Stand back!" a girl bent aside iron-bars in her strength. "Listen! Don't ever come back here! You'll definitely meet kind people someday!" A child ran across the battlefield, never turning to look or giving a sliver of thought for what was left back there.'

"I know this kind of tears. What kind of life has Naruto had. Tell us this instant, now," Sanji hissed, determined not to let any hint to his past slip.

Kakashi stole a glance towards Naruto first to find Nami was standing now, holding the 12-year-old in her arms. Looking over at them, she glared at the pair.

"I'm stronger than I look," Nami spoke. "Let's find a place to get Naruto some food and a large glass of water. Then, we can ask him.

Sanji, call the others, but give us some space until we find out why and what happened here."

Nodding, the cook dialed-up his new baby-den-den, "Buda-buda-buda....buda-buda-buda... buda-buda... CLICK."

"Hey, who's there? Can you all hear me?" Luffy's voice rang from the snail's lips.

"Captain? Everybody, have you picked up?" A chorus of each voice in the Straw hat crew followed, clearly everyone testing theirs for the first time.

"I'm here too, using the big one," Zoro reported.

"Good," Sanji replied. "We found Naruto. He's alright and didn't get hurt. Kakashi and Nami got him right now; we'll meet you at the ship but take a long walk-about first. We don't want any bounty hunters or the guys who started this to find their way to our ship."

Luffy fought back but Sanji and Sakura were firm. While this happened, Kakashi came forward to look down at his Genin.

"Naruto?" Rubbing the back of his head, the Sensei managed to coax him to look up towards him.

"S....sensei. Nobody... nobody glared... nobody.....hates... me....here..."

"I'm... not... al.....alone," he croaked out. Still, Kakashi didn't understand.

They walked out to a small café nearby, with Naruto down to hiccups. Sanji asked for a private room and one look from the owner spoke to how they were a parent themselves. Moments after they found themselves inside a booth with screens, where tea, a small plate of onigiri and a large mug of water were delivered.

Naruto sipped it down, slowly. The other three were patient, Kakashi especially focused on a way he could pry what happened to his student; 'Naruto often says what he thinks or feels, much more than Sasuke would. But I'm even more at a loss here than ever. Maybe... hhhh, interrogation won't work here with the other two around. I'll probe first then see what comes.'

"Naruto. Can you hear me?" The tone was solely business, causing Sanji to grab a smoke and Nami to edge closer to the boy.

"Uh....ye-yeah," the Genin croaked, lighter than in the alley.

"After you and Luffy ran off," Kakashi continued, slowly. "I made a shadow clone to follow you in case something bad happened. But after stopping Luffy from climbing the execution stand, you ran off."

"Uh-huh," the boy answered.

"Did you find a fight at all? Or something dangerous?"

"No," Naruto replied, looking at the table, spent.

"Was there something at the park? People maybe?"

"Hhh-uhk," another hiccup came, Naruto dropping his head lower. Nami took that sign and slipped closer to him; surprised at how by a slight contact the boy shuffled much closer to her.

"Uhh... Naruto?"

"Yeah... S-Sanji-sen-sen-senpai?"

The cook narrowed his eyes, trying to stay calm. "Did something different happen? Something you, might have wanted for a long time, but never told anyone about? Not even to us?"

All that ensued was silence. Naruto looked ready to cry again if he had any tears left, or his eyes hadn't been raw from the torrents that already passed.

"Naruto," his sensei this time came back in, thinking back to the last time he'd seen his student crying.

"Did someone glare at you? Or become angry like Sasuke and Sakura were in Hamna Village?"

"N-n-n-n-n-no... sen-sensei," he answered, shaking now. "Nobody glared at me. Nobody whispered or said that I should die. Nobody forced other kids to stay away from me, and one person even me an... an apology."

While he spoke, it was Nami and Sanji's turn to shake; both recoiled at what Naruto described.

"Sensei I don't feel like that. How other people see me, like a germ or something horrible because of the Ky-Huh!" Naruto's hands shot to his mouth, horrified at what he almost let slip, panicking as he looked from Nami to Sanji; then back to his teacher, desperate.

Kakashi didn't move, acting more subtly. "Nobody....Naruto, you mean how others would treat you back in Konohagakure.?You found people aren't like that here?" the Jonin coaxed, the Sharingan-user less blind than before.

"Look at me," he coached the boy, leaning forward to occupy Naruto's sight. "You're saying that... you feel terrible... because people here were that nice to you?"

"Y-y-yes," he answered. Their nakama shooting looks from one ninja to the other, burning to interrupt but somehow unwilling to cut through and upset Naruto with demands.

"Sensei, not just here; everywhere. In Harm's village people were nice to me. Patty, Chef Zeff, Carne, all the cooks and Sanji-Senpai said they wanted me to stay around and were sad when we left. People in Nami's village said they should let other kids stay around me, they even thanked me. Inari, Tazuna, Tsunami and everyone in

Nami no Kuni, all of them saw me as me, not something else from the Fox. I....."

He grew silent, the truth building up inside held at bay not with a mask or denial, but emotional exhaustion. "I've always wanted this. I never want to be alone and now I'm not. But why do I feel so bad, and I hurt so much?"

Nobody moved. Kakashi eased back slowly, understanding finally in his mind. Putting the situation together, his face travelled to Nami, then Sanji, and back to Naruto again.

"Naruto.....do you trust me?" The weight of two worlds could almost be heard there. Naruto shifting a little to be confused.

"Ah.....yes? I do sensei."

Kakashi took a breath and leaned backwards. "Nami, Sanji. You were both right not to ask the others to come here. But to put it simply, Naruto had an emotional breakdown from a lifetime with almost as much suffering as Sasuke has."

The cook's head jerked at this, the cigarette nearly falling from his mouth. Nami's jaw hung to the floor; growing pale she looked between both of the ninjas....while Kakashi continued.

"All because of the Kyubi. The Nine-Tailed Demon Fox."

"SENSEI!" Naruto shot to his feet, standing on the table with an exclamation of shock and betrayal.

"Naruto," the Joinin replied, calmly. "Will... you... trust....me? Please." After his plead, a stare-down between them ensued, until Naruto swallowed back and collapsed; the outcry taking even more out from him.

'It's incredible after experiencing this much trauma, he's even still awake," the Hatake observed, then turned back to his explanation.

"Within the Elemental Nations, there are certain creatures known as the Bijū; the Tailed Beasts. Giant animals, distinguished by the number of tails that they have and their unfathomable power. An average Bijū can level mountains, eradicate entire armies, and are large enough to swallow even Don Krieg's Dreadnaught in their jaws."

"There are Nine of them that have been recorded; some by other villages ours has close ties with. As I Jonin I know of such reports, such as from Sunagakure about the One-tailed Sand-Demon, Shukaku. Or Takigakure's struggles with the Seven-Tailed Horned-Beast. Yet, the most powerful Tailed Beast in the Nine-Tailed Fox, the Kyūbi. And one day it attacked our village, slaughtering thousands. On the very day that Naruto was born."

More followed, Kakashi describing the damage and death toll from that fateful day and the sacrifices made to defeat the creature.

"After Lord Fourth, my sensei, overcame it, people were still left with grief and hatred towards the beast and anyone or anything that would remind them of it," he explained. "Sometimes in unreasonable or outright unacceptable ways."

Sanji himself nodded, while Nami was still confused. "What could this have to do with Naruto, though? I mean, he was a baby, just hours born. How could his life be linked to it at all?"

Unbeknownst to them, Naruto slid one hand over his stomach; dread and fear building up.

"Absolutely nothing, to any reasonable person," Kakashi answered. To which Naruto's eyes grew wide, totally lost. "But reason rarely has any place towards strong hatred, revulsion or anguish. So many people lost those they cared for, leaned on, and adored. But the object of their hatred was defeated, so thousands in our home wanted to find something else to channel their hatred towards. From regular civilians to even some shinobi I know, they all wanted to find

an outlet for their emotions; towards anyone or anything linked to the Kyubi."

"And they landed on Naruto."

Taking one deep breath, Kakashi paused before committing to his gambit. "Naruto was born that same day. Rumours began spreading of how he was somehow a herald of the Demon Fox, or just a glance at him would invoke reminders of all the loss suffered from that day."

"People let that hatred build and spread, like an epidemic. Parents would ostracise Naruto, leaving him isolated and friendless. Some ninjas even from the clans did the same, encouraging younger children to reject Naruto or make him a total pariah. One incident even involved a group of students daring Naruto to run into a small battlefield near the village, where enemy ninjas almost killed him."

A fist slammed on the table, Sanji was trembling now, with rage, Nami not much better.

"That makes no sense at all, it's stupid and selfish!" Sanji's outcry was matched by Nami shooting to her feet, glaring down at Kakashi.

"What are you hiding?" She demanded. "I mean, that can't be the truth. Nobody is ever that blind or terrible when they're angry!"

"No?" Kakashi questioned her, calmly. "Would you say the same thing about Arlong? And of everybody who followed him?"

Nami almost swallowed her tongue, staggering at this low blow. But Kakashi wasn't finished. "Their hatred towards humanity had to come from somewhere, Nami. And I doubt every human alive can claim to be as happy-go-lucky as Luffy." he continued. "Someone hurt them, so deeply, they decided all of humanity was to blame and revelled in that hatred so entirely, you and your home suffered from it."

"If we were to find another Fishman right here, today," Kakashi propositioned. "Would you be able to look at them without memories of what Arlong, Chew, Kurobi, Hatchan and others did? Or would those memories come back and influence what you would expect or give to that Fishman?"

Nami had to swallow past a lump in her throat several times.

Sanji wasn't happy with this tirade, but he did see the parallels. "So, Naruto was hated by everyone. Kid?"

"Uhhhh....yeah?" Naruto looked up at his tutor. A clouded tint was in Sanji's own visible eye, and he was no longer smoking. "What you muttered about before. How nobody here wanted you to die. In a nutshell, everyone you knew growing up saw you as trash at best, or lashed out at worst?" The orphan began curling into himself again, drawing up both legs in a ball; loading fresh sympathy and horror alike in both Nami and Sanji. "Y... yeah. A few people," Naruto confessed. "They even threw me to the ground or grown-ups would kick at me. I tried anything to be accepted by them. And when that didn't work, I'd pull pranks. Painting houses, scaring people, or causing them to run around mad. That way, at least they'd look at me with something. Because just getting ignored, having everyone not recognize you....that was always worse."

"And... you still want to go back," Sanji questioned. "You want to be 'Hokage,' like a king over people in that place?"

"The Hokage isn't... they aren't a ruler in that sense," Kakashi answered, while the question shook Nami.

"Yes!" Naruto cried, somehow lighter with his goal back on-topic. "I mean, the Hokage are always respected by everybody, so if I became it and a great ninja, they'd have to treat me like I'm somebody."

Naruto wasn't finished either. "If I just ran away, I would be a coward. If I tried actually hurting people back, they'd have been right all along

and I'd prove it. Sure, it hurt now, but to become Hokage still is my dream!"

He was smiling now, not fiercely, but....contemplating. "And.....well... I guess..." he sounded confused. as a fresh idea he hadn't thought of was growing. "I never knew my Mom and Dad. The closest person to a family I know was the Hokage. The Third one, Ji-ji" Naruto described, his honesty clear as sunny air.

"Ji-ji would see what happened to me, so he always gave me some attention after the villagers would hate me so much. He's always saying how the Hokage is like a father to all the village, and that he would be a terrible one if he ignored even the smallest person who lived there."

"And there's Iruka-sensei, my teacher before Kakashi-sensei," Naruto continued, smiling now against his sadness-worn face. "Iruka-sensei, he saved my life when those ninjas nearly killed me. And he declared that I wasn't some monster, that I was Naruto of Konohagakure and someone he was proud of."

"If I just ran away or gave-up my dream, then I'd let down him and Ji-ji. I can't do that, so I still wanna get back home, to become the Hokage and change what everybody thinks of me!"

Now....as Naruto's story ended... nobody was moving. Sanji's eyes were large enough to see both through his hair, his jaw hung down in his lap and the spent cigarette was dead on the table. Kakashi wasn't too far behind, his right eye impossibly sported a glint of tearful pride, with a wet sensation in his headband over the left one.

Nami's reaction was the strongest, her hands now over her mouth and trembling. Looking back on her own past, she parallels Kakashi had brought up between her and Naruto, and this boy's reaction sparked an amalgamation of awe.

Taking one breath, she made a choice.

Walking up to Naruto, who still stood up on his chair, the girl gently turned his face towards hers. The smile that greeted him was the broadest Naruto had ever seen. "Then you really are impossible, Naruto. Somebody who will face a challenge everyone else would give up on, with just willpower and not break until you succeed."

Grinning down she took a breath. "You went through all that, and now I'm willing to guess how you finally found kindness here, but bottled it all up. All until it came crashing out like a tidal wave? Kind of like when I stabbed myself when Nojiko got hurt?"

Wincing at her own memory, she missed Kakashi's shudder as the final pieces for this mystery fell into place. Nevertheless, what Nami did see was Naruto contemplate this and find understanding.

"Yeah. I guess that did happen. I mean, I'd always try not to think about how alone I was and used to say I never cried about it; but now right here I got weak and it came out."

"No," Sanji declared. Powerful enough to leave even Luffy trembling. "You aren't weak, kid, at all. To carry on through a life like that and still be hardworking, understanding and altruistic. Nobody but the strongest could ever do that."

"Sanji's right," Nami joined in. Naruto looked between them before she called to him. "Naruto. You've never had any family before. Ever?"

"Yeah," he answered, simply. It was casual enough for Nami to feel another pang through her heart, and strengthen this decision more than ever.

"Then, I think we should change that."

"You already know that Nojiko and I are sisters, but honestly I think I've wanted to have a little brother too," she smiled at the orphan, who took their turn to be amazed. "I'm proud of you, and I like you, and you are the greatest person I've ever met. Just like how Zoro

promised to help Sasuke, I think Sanji and I both want to help you achieve your dream. Your ambition to become Hokage. But... for now and forever. I'd like to be your older sister too. How does that sound?"

Naruto felt another lump in his throat. Somehow it wasn't like the torments he'd felt earlier....but relief for a hole he'd grown so used to feeling it had become forgotten. 'What... family....big sister....she... wants me.....'

"You.....want me?" he asked, fearful. Nami understood though, pulling him into another hug, their 4th in the last hour. "Yes. And for you to come to me if you ever need help or feel lost; like a little brother would."

That did it. Naruto couldn't speak at all. He only replied by returning the embrace and holding it stronger every second. "Nee-.....nee-ch.....ch-" Naruto kept trying to whisper something. "....nee-chan." Sharp ears picked it up, and when Nami looked over at Kakashi, he answered. "It means, 'Older sister.'"

"Nami-nee-chan....Nami-nee," Naruto kept balling. Kakashi had to blink now, using a cloth to wipe the tears moving down his face. Sanji himself turned away, still hiding in his own past for his own reasons. 'Reiju....'

Nami and Naruto didn't move from that spot for a long while. Not until she noticed he fell asleep. After finishing their own orders, the group left with the navigator carrying her new little brother piggyback. They moved through Loguetown easily as dusk began to fall. Until the Merry came in sight with most of the crew aboard.

"Hey, they're back!" Sakura announced, and everyone but Luffy ran up to see. "I thought you said he wasn't hurt," Zoro interrogated them, holding a bokken while Sasuke had a matching one.

"He wasn't physically hurt," Nami explained. "Right now, Naruto's only exhausted. And where did you buy those!" Snapping at her

accusations, Zoro and Sasuke both traded looks.

"There's a shop right there on the road that sells gear for a dojo," the Uchiha pointed off to a sign with a bowing figure in armour hanging off a pole. "They were selling these training-tools at a discount, so we bought a pair with what I saved-up working for Zeff. Zoro-sensei insisted that we start training."

Several bruising covering Sasuke testified to that truth. The boy was only stumbling around, avoiding too much weight on his left ankle or right thigh.

"Don Luffy ran off to find y'all after he got impatient. Talked about wantin' to see if Naruto was okay for himself," Gin reported. Looking over at the boy with concern. Nami herself sighed, about to ask someone to go find him, before remembering their new countermeasure.

"Luffy?" she asked into the baby-den-den-mushi. "Nami? What is it? Where are you with Naruto?" the captain asked back.

"I have him on my back, and he'd asleep. We're back at the ship. Come on here as fast as you can. There are a lot of things to share." After the snail clicked off, Nami took it to mean Luffy chose to just run right back without a second thought for anything.

"Kakashi."

"Hm?" the Jonin turned to look at her.

"I'm going to set Naruto down for a while after everything today left him this exhausted. Tell them exactly what you shared with Sanji and me. Sakura, you should take watch tonight with Gin, and give Naruto space." Without explaining further, Nami walked towards the lady's cabin, closing the doors and removing Naruto's jacket. She slipped him into the bed and then moved over to her desk, building a list of what they'd go shopping for the next day while staying vigil over her new younger brother.

Luffy came running up a short time later and vaulted up to the deck. "Hey, where are Nami and Naruto?" he demanded.

"They're in her bedroom and-" Luffy took off before Kakashi finished, bursting inside.

"Luffy! Kakashi has some important things to say," Nami berated him.

"That can wait, I gotta see Naruto first," the rubber man declared. Crossing over, he looked down at Naruto and let out a breath. "If another of my nakama get hurt like you and Ussop did, or Naruto breathing that gas from bastard Krieg, I'd never forgive myself," he spoke. "I'm glad nobody hurt Naruto, but why are his eyes so red? And why is he sleeping?"

Nami looked from her captain to her family and came to a decision. "I'll tell you Luffy, just sit down and don't go anywhere. It's about how Naruto did get hurt on the inside, not the outside."

While the uncomfortably serious rubber man sat down and listened to Nami, Kakashi was telling the rest of the crew the same story he'd given Sanji and Nami, with the cook filling in some details and explanations.

"Sensei, that doesn't make sense," Sakura countered him. "Naruto was always smiling or trying to outdo Sasuke-kun at the Academy. I don't remember anyone treating him like that, and he'd run around laughing after setting up a prank."

Sasuke himself was more neutral, while Zoro, Gin and Ussop picked up a measure of the truth.

"Sakura, do you remember what I told you in Hamna village. About how some people might celebrate it if Naruto were to die?" The Jonin answered, to which the girl's denials stopped briefly. "Can you honestly say that you never saw Naruto held at arm's length by other

people, or that others whispered about how he was a terrible menace? More than a few harmless pranks could warrant?"

Thinking back, through her remarkable memory, the girl actually did find one case; *hiding behind her father's legs, she peeked out to see a boy in the centre of the ring. People on the outside were glaring. Whispering, "Who would dare touch him?"....."Is the Hokage mad, the day he was born was-" "I know but he's still there, and now in the Academy. I might pull my child out if he's in the same building unsupervised."* She didn't hear anything from her own parents as they moved off with her in tow.' He legs gave out, dropping in a heap with guilt twisting her guts into knots.

"Naruto has suffered and always wore a mask by smiling. Or tried to distract himself from that pain. Today nobody here was anything like what he encountered in our village. So, with that dream fulfilled his repressed feelings came out in a bang, that each of us felt today," Kakashi explained.

Sasuke was quiet as well, thinking back to memories with his mother and brother more healthily than he had in years. One featured Naruto walking by with both hands in his pockets and a grumbling stomach... as alone as Kakashi described. The Uchiha thought back further, confused. "If Naruto felt that terrible, why didn't it show? Or how did he manage to always make a fool of himself instead of doing something else?"

"Sasuke."

"Hmm?" looking up the Uchiha felt like the Jonin was reading his mind.

"Naruto would always challenge you in the Academy? Even though he was outclassed nearly every time. Word got around in the village," Kakashi explained. "You always were at the centre of attention. You had everything that Naruto craved, even as others would ignore him at best, insult him the most often, or even hit and throw him out of their way."

The last comment brought a wave of guilt to Sakura, remembering how she did that to get around Naruto to Sasuke.

"I think that Naruto did that only because of how popular you were, and maybe if he won, then people would acknowledge him," the Jonin continued. "Even with Inari or on the day that we became a team, Naruto talked about how he's not a coward and wants to earn other people's admiration and respect. He refuses to allow anyone to dictate or direct how he should live his life or what he should be."

"That's probably why he didn't follow orders or instructions well, since across a lifetime he always pushed back against others who said he was an abomination. Or, that he should just die."

Zoro grew stiff at his, Ussop shaking while Gin was stone-faced. Sakura's hands flew to her mouth and Sanji remained calm, having heard it all already.

Sasuke remained stoic, yet contemplative. Hiding the itch in his mind of Itachi commanding him to live only to kill him, and processing Naruto rejecting the hatred of the village and declaring he'd do things his way and nobody else's. A memory even sprang up, of both crossing paths by a river; *'while he sat near the bank Sasuke felt an itch somebody was staring at him. Turning his head, he found Naruto walking by, who made a face as Sasuke then turned away, pouting. The Sasuke did the same, refusing to give anything.'* That memory morphed into another one; a conversation between himself and Sakura: *"Anyway Naruto just picks fights with you. You know why he's so annoying, it's because he wasn't raised right. He doesn't have a mother or father. No one to teach him right from wrong. Think about it, he just does whatever comes into his head."* At her comments, Sasuke started glaring back; something behind her words rubbed him in a bad way. *"If you don't have parents to tell you, how would you know? He's selfish and bratty. He's all alone."* As Sakura finished, Sasuke himself spoke up. *"Alone. Isolated."* "Huh?" Sakura asked. *"It's not about your parents scolding you. You have no idea what it means to be alone," Sasuke spat.'*

'Maybe I was wrong too,' in the present, Sasuke's mind confessed something to himself. 'Naruto... he knows about living alone long than me. He's strong, that's for sure, and still wants to earn respect instead of becoming blinded by hatred. Like.....like I was when I endangered him against that Fishman. Or Kakashi pinned me to a tree.'

"So, there you have it," Kakashi wrapped up. "Naruto. Sasuke. Nami... even Gin losing his crew and Sanji starving to near death. A lot of us seem not to have the most blessed lives. Even I'll admit, there isn't anybody waiting for me back in our village, because everyone I ever cared for, is dead."

More casual about feelings and his past than he used to be, Kakashi looked across the fresh shock every had towards him.

"But we find ways to live beyond that, so long as it doesn't endanger others. This meltdown was a long time coming; Naruto even shared he started feeling it before we started working in the Baratie but just pushed it aside. Until today when it all broke apart."

Nami, has decided to become an older sister for Naruto and I doubt he'd even had a more genuine smile before. She likely wants to watch over him tonight, hence the reason why he's inside the girl's cabin now."

"Well, he sure is brave. That's for sure," Ussop spoke up. "Going through a life like that without anybody to lean on, or any chance of things improving... I mean I did fool around a little bit like that on my own island to get some attention from the people after my Mom died, but that was nothing against the scale that he found."

"I see. Still, it also means we have a new responsibility," Sanji announced, more serious than he'd been towards Arlong's crew or cooking. "Naruto and Sasuke both have suffered in the past and have their own ambitions to strive for. And we're going to aid them in reaching those goals; I'm going to up Naruto's training and make

sure he's ready to deal with anything people throw at him in his own village now. Kakashi, you have a problem with that?"

The cook met the greyhound's eye, and neither disagreed. Gin himself stayed silent, unable to relate but still impressed with the story nonetheless. 'Sasuke and his clan massacre. Naruto gitin' ostracised. Do all ninjas like them have this sorta tragedy? Does Sakura have her own kind of suffering too?'

Zoro nodded, promising himself to keep a closer watch on his subordinates, as the first mate. Putting that aside, he called over to Sasuke to resume their training. Kakashi joined them with his own, pulling out the Saw-blade and giving some experimental swings, contemplating what to do with it.

Gin and Sakrua took care of the ship while Sanji went to prepare their dinner. By the time stars mapped out the sky, Sanji and Sakura were on the night shift after she traded with an exhausted and sore Sasuke.

'I don't think I'd be able to sleep at all now,' she thought, looking down to the water below. 'Kakashi-sensei was right, I only followed and crowd and maybe hurt Naruto more than others did. But Naruto himself never retaliated back to me. How much heart does he have?'

Thinking back even harder, more and more started sliding into place. 'Naruto... he always runs right in, or likes shouting about what he's doing, even at enemies we meet. Is that from getting ignored so much, and he keeps craving some reactions from an audience?'

From their time in the bell-test to Naruto's terrible entrance at Tazuna's bridge, Sakura's mind continued generating more possibilities; mixing confusion with guilt and horror in an unseen dark cloud overhead.

'What can I do to make it up to him?'

Elsewhere, out across Loguetown, another pirate crew were gathered for a scheme.

"It's true boss, I swear he ran right by me today," one brigand promised to his captain.

"Grr. This is some flashily news. I don't know how could that bastard have flashily-dropped in now of all times? Is fate smiling at me with this kind of opportunity?" another captain grinned maniacally.

"Well, now I can repay him as well, after all a woman's indignity can never be unanswered." As a slender, pale-skinned heart-throb commented, the rest of the men inside were shouting their approval, preparing to repay the man she spoke of with pervy-vengeance.

"Who would dare to lay a finger on the captain?" "Anyone who dishonours her needs to die." "I would do this job for free if she asked me to."

"Guhahahahahahahahaha! Well now, how then show we flashily plan for-"

Before an answer could be supplied, a new face immediately sat between both of the main partners.

"Hey, who do you think you are? Wanna drink, or join in on our party?" The red-nosed one questioned.

"No," an icy voice, laced with disgust, shot back. Pushing a pair of round glasses back to his face, the slick new arrival fixed each with an angry glare. "You are of course referring to Straw Hat Luffy. I desire revenge upon that-"

"Whaaaaaa!" In a flash, several body parts flew over the room in a panicking twister.

"How and why in all the heck are you here? Or alive for that matter anyways?" Captain Buggy demanded, his legs shaking with fear.

End.

[1]- Not a grammatical error; a child is speaking here and a little off her mark for the right words.

[2]- Naruto and Hinata are the same age. Neji was subjected to the Hyuga family seal when Hinata was three, and Hanabi was born five years after Hinata. In the final few episodes of Naruto Shippuden, filler of multiple childhoods include some of Hinata and Neji. In them, Neji did have some time while his father was alive, then at a ceremony for Hizashi's death, Hanabi was nowhere in that scene. Placing these on a timeline, deductively the Hyuga affair happened while Hinata was closer to 4 years old, and Naruto was the same age when they encountered one another on a snowy night.

Wow! That's a wrap, and get ready for the next one. I hope Naruto's reaction was gripping and intense to all the readers, and delivered through the build-up across the prior arcs. Get ready for the next one too; Garp will make his debut, I promise. And an old, fanatical enemy from Luffy's past is ready to even a score.

The Gathering Storm

Growth Through Chaos: Chapter 19:

The Gathering Storm.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please, Read and Review. I really, really like Reviews.

It was evening, and aboard the Going Merry in the docks of Loguetown, the crew were ignoring rowdy noise from the town in favour of listening about Naruto. Especially Luffy as Nami repeated what she'd learned to him, standing in the women's quarters while said boy was asleep in the bed.

"And everyone in his home agreed Naruto should be the outlet for their anger and grief. At best, growing up they saw him as trash or a monster even worse than Arlong. All because of the day he was born on. So today when nobody was that unkind here, it was all too much for my little brother to handle."

"Little brother," Luffy repeated, sitting on the floor beside the occupied bed. While Nami stood leaning against a wall. Looking over the sleeping Naruto, his peaceful smile warmed her heart.

"Yeah," Nami confessed. "Since he never had any family and we both suffered because of hate, I asked him if he'd like to be my younger brother. That's why I have to watch over him tonight."

Looking between them both, Luffy scrunched up his face; "So Naruto didn't get beaten up today, but he cried because others were just nice to him? Everybody left him alone, and it hurt too much to think about?"

Nami answered, but the captain didn't listen to her reply. Luffy was thinking back to some days he knew from a long time ago....

"I was scarred-AWWWHHAAAWWWHHAAHHHH-Thought I was gonna die-!" At night, in the middle of a forest, he cried his eyes and face to pieces after getting rescued from Porchemy. His brother Ace was there, with someone else that Luffy refused to think about at all.' "RAWWW! Would you shut up?! You're not hurt that bad! So stop crying already! When are you gonna stop being a Baby?! Don't you wanna be a pirate!" After Ace complained, Luffy clamped shut like a snare; forcing with all he could muster not to do something and make Ace go back to not liking him.'

'Next, he bowed, thanking both the other boy. "You... saved me." A fresh deluge came, and Ace came forwards but got stopped by something.' Reflexively, Luffy's mind refused to think of who it was; "I was afraid." Inside the memory, this message crept past his lips while everything in his body still hurt, "that you wouldn't be my friend." The other boy claimed dying was worse than telling, but Luffy knew somewhere deep that wasn't the truth.'

"Why'd you want to be my friend? That's dumb. It's not like I've been nice to you. In fact, I've given you hell ever since we first met. It's been months why haven't you just given up?"

'Think of what it be if he wasn't there, Luffy shouted back to Ace: "Well... cause-cause I-I got no one else to turn to! I can't go back to Fusha Village! And I don't like the mountain bandits either! I'd be all alone all the time if I didn't follow you. Getting beat-up hurt but... BUT BEING LONELY HURTS MORE!"

Blinking, Luffy's attention came back to the present and kept staring at his younger Nakama. 'So... Naruto knows that. About being alone,

and he was stuck that way all the time? He's twelve and he stayed alone for every year?... how... how can he smile or get strong? No Grandpa, no brother, no nobody...'

"Luffy? Luffy?" Nami tried to capture his attention. "Hey, there's meat in here."

"Huh? Food?" Luffy questioned her. "Nami, why you think about that at this time? There's more important stuff."

Nami fell backwards, sinking into a chair after she was knocked for a loop in dismay: Monkey D. Luffy had ignored FOOD. A rumble came from his stomach the next second. A rumble Luffy still won't move for, instead just staring at Nami. "Is Naruto gonna be okay? He knows he got us here, and we're friends?"

Nami just kept staring. 'Get a grip,' she shook her head, then swallowed. "I think so. But, it might take a bit until that truly sinks in. He'll probably sleep until tomorrow. But right now Luffy, are you hungry?"

Luffy's lips puckered, twisting to his right while his eyes turned the other way, and he was sweating. "Uh-uh. I'm fine." His stomach loudly refuted that claim.

Above them, the hatch opened and a platter came flying down, filled with a mound of sizzling roast flanks. "Eat up." Sanji gracefully descended the ladder balancing a plate covered with a Vogue on his head. Depositing the meal before Nami, he lifted the vogue then glanced at Luffy tearing into the meat, and turned his full attention to Naruto.

Even Nami heard her own stomach complain at the scent of roast pheasant in tangerine sauce wafting from the plate. "Thank you Sanji," she spoke, from under a deep shade of pink.

"I doubt Naruto got any lunch before things fell apart. And after today skipping dinner won't do him any good. Somebody should-"

"Touch him, and I will drown you," Nami hissed, and Sanji felt the touch of death tickle down his spine. Luffy almost choked on his mouthful, and looking towards the danger he found Nami transfixing them with a look that resembled a ferocious lioness. Survival instincts overcame Sanji. "I'll be cooking up extra breakfast tomorrow, then. But make sure he gets a huge lunch to go with it while you're out tomorrow, Nami."

Satisfied, the girl nodded and went back to her meal. Luffy meanwhile stood up beside his ship's-cook without looking at him. "Sanji. You remember what I ordered Zoro after he promised to train Sasuke?"

"Say the word, captain," Sanji pledged. "Not even the command from any lady or even Zeff himself could get me to ensure Naruto's dream will be real." Looking over at each other, both idiots embodied fearsome mountains.

"Take Naruto and teach him," Luffy order his cook, "not just about fighting but cooking, too. If someone cooks great meals, it's impossible for anyone not to like them. Food brings everyone together. And what Naruto feels is worse than knives or spiked knuckles or a sword cut. All he had through being lonely was one dream, and it got him through the time with pain."

Sanji and Nami felt their mouths turn dryer than a desert, stirring over not solely at Luffy's words, but how he spoke of them as old wounds. "Nobody is gonna give him that much hurt again, so we've gotta get him strong to keep that dream and make sure everyone likes him, too. Right?"

Under Luffy's glare, Sanji snapped at attention; his brisk nod pacifying the captain.

"Awesome! Glad we solved that!" Luffy's trademark smile back, and he left through the hatch to the lounge. "We got more adventures tomorrow; sleep good Nami," and he was gone.

Sanji stayed there staring before he shook his head. 'Okay, if he bipolar or something? That might actually let some things about Luffy today make sense.' Nami meanwhile had different thoughts: 'Luffy, do you know about that's like? Actually, what was your childhood like?'

The cook soon left after Nami finished her meal. Next, the Navigator changed into a new set of pyjamas she'd bought that day, a green set with light pants and a button collar, and climbed in with her younger brother. Naruto shuffled about, reflexes unsure of this sensation; but slowly he pressed in closer, with one hand grasping Nami's arm.

Her lips trembling, the girl had to bite them to stop. Swallowing she wrapped her free arm around him over the covers, a shield from anything and everything.

'Naruto.....you won't be alone again. And you'll always have another home on this ship. I promise that' she silently pledged. Thinking back on the minor parallels between them, the navigator looked over at a picture on the bedside table: one of herself and Nojiko with Bellemere.

Frowning, she thought of her true mother the moment Arlong shot her... next the hatred her former 'crew' had given out to Humans... the reflections from those in Cocoyoshi village and herself... and now....

"What are you hiding? I mean, that can't be the truth; nobody is ever that blind or terrible when they're angry!" she demanded.'

"No?" Kakashi questioned her, calmly. "Would you say the same thing about Arlong and everyone who followed him?"...."If we were to find another fishman right here, today. Would you be able to look at them without memories of what Arlong, Chew, Kurobi, Hatchan and others did? Or would those memories come back and influence what you would expect or give to that Fishman?"

Her eyes travelling back to him, someone who personified the dangers of guilt-by-association, Nami's thought became roving between reflections of him and Bellemere. 'Would you hate pirates like my friends? Or did you feel any doubt or worry like this after adopting Nojiko and me?'

Dusk evolved into night leaving most of the crew asleep; the men finally used to Luffy's snoring in the men's cabin. Up on deck, Sakura had her eyes in the distance; where the moon hung and a match reflection rippled on the sea.

Behind her, one man looked over at his crewmate, chewing on his lips to think over the matter on his mind. A grunt echoed over the deck, ignored by Sakura while she continued staring off; curious. 'Naruto. Is this why he kept asking me about dates at the Academy? Or why he called Inari a coward?' Silently, she thought back over the explanations he gave to the crew about Naruto. 'Whenever I do think back about it, he really did suffer. Sasuke-kun definitely suffered worse, he knew his family for so long and found all of them dead; that must leave a deeper wound, but....maybe they are the same; quality and quantity. Naruto got mistreated more often, while Sasuke experienced a singular, terrible horror.'

'What kinda teammate have I been, and why didn't somebody tell me? I'd definitely have treated them both so much better.'

"Yah mind looks like a hurricane's a rangin' in there, Sakura." Beside her Gin's raspy tone drew her attention. The man leaned on the railing, arms folded over it and staring.

"Ummm.....well....after we heard about both Sasuke and Naruto this week. I'm wondering, why they didn't say something about it earlier. Naruto, he would shout whatever was on his mind for as long as I've known him, and the Uchiha massacre wouldn't be something people could stay quiet about. But... I never knew..."

"Hmmm. Yeah, those kid-..." Gin caught his breath. "No. There ain't no way anyone can call the two ah them boys a'tall. They've

experienced darker sides to life than most in any lifetime. Yet..."

Looking over at her, the pirate swallowed back to brace himself.
"What about you, little lady? Between you and Kakashi, do all ninjas have tragedy in their lives like Naruto & Sasuke do?"

Sakura looked up in surprise, thinking back to her own teacher, and some words from him.

"You are the only person between the Genin of this team, who has had any support or stability in their lives. Naruto and Sasuke have both suffered, but their goals and ambitions prevented them from falling into despair and anger. Now. Those goals have been ripped away." Kakashi spoke to her."

'The only person... did he include....'

"Um. I'm not sure," she replied, Gin making a face at this. "I mean about Kakashi-sensei," she clarified. "He never talks about himself very much at all, so I don't know. But I haven't had anything like what they've suffered from, no."

Just as she spoke, Sakura felt something crawling over his skin, shuddering in the warm night. The girl worked to ignore it. "I always had family who were there, sometimes they were annoying, but now I just wish I could see my parents again. I've never suffered like what Sasuke and Naruto, or Nami-san and Sanji-san have, ever. Or even you after running into Hawkeyes-san."

Looking down on the deck, the same sensation from before crept deeper into Sakura's skin. She shook her legs and arms, rubbing her hands over her elbows, until Gin surprised her.

"Ah see. Guess I'm actually glad to hear 'bout that."

"Huh?" Looking up a question expelled through her green eyes, one the outlook picked up on.

"Between all that we've found so far, a person who ain't got that kinda trauma hiding in their closet is a blessin'. All ah us are misfits in one way or more, and we all know dangers are lurkin' out there. Goin' forward, I'm a measure concerned there might be more tragedy in the past to come back and bit us in the butt."

"Vice-Admiral, sir! We will reach Loguetown tomorrow, sir."

"Hmmm." On the deck of his warship, a certain wreaking-ball bulldog leered out ahead, grinning. "Luffy, you're not getting' out from my watch this time, kiddo. Beating-up pirates is the most fun the world. I'll drag you and every miscreant you've dragged into a crew straight to Headquarters and start training for life in the Navy."

"BWAAAAAHHHHAAAAAAHHHHHAAAAAAA!" A booming laugh continued, echoing over the water... somehow reaching the Going Merry several clicks away where it touched the sleeping Monkey D. Luffy; shuddering right through him and-

"Pistol!"

"Wha' the hell is that!" Gin shouted, waking up most of the crew to the fresh hole in the middle of their deck.

"Huh? What? What's this mystery feeling!" After complaints, indifference and a few bonks-to-the-head, the Straw Hats wrote off their Captain's move to be a random nightmare. Getting back to sleep, Monkey D. Luffy kept tossing left and right.

Nothing more happened that night. Dawn announced a fresh day and everyone got up earlier than normal; Sanji, Kakashi, Sasuke and Zoro left Ussop and a snoring Luffy behind; one to get breakfast ready and three for training while the night-sift took a slight nap.

When sunlight came basking over the harbour, it found Sasuke kneeling over holding his own bokken, with Zoro and Kakashi sparring with their own blades.

The jagged edge scythed overhead, parried by Zoro's blade as he dashed in. Kakashi didn't miss a beat, bending his knees to evade the cross-slash, then spun around to whip what used to be Arlong's Saw Blade over his shoulder. Zoro blocked it and both men locked their weapons together briefly as the ex-bounty hunter pressed in on Kakashi's grip.

They jockeyed around to press one angle and block the other from a good position, but Kakashi's weapon favoured that setting and without a 2nd or 3rd blade, Zoro felt a prick of the weapon touch his neck.

"Don't be so determined, without thought," Kakashi admonished him. Zoro grit his teeth but only nodded, flexing his free hand, then drew Wado Ichimonji into a high guard, while Kakashi weighed the massive weapon in his hand.

'This isn't so bad, but I'm barely able to use it with one hand now, unlike when we started. Zabuzza's Kubikiribochō was similar, but how much strength training did he need to master that weapon first?' Kakashi levelled the saw-blade into an angle, his wrists groaning at the strain of the near-4-meter long weapon.

Kakashi dashed in, cutting a diagonal-slash Zoro moved to block- and nothing! Kakashi vanished from Zoro's sight. Dropping low, he rolled under the same weapon from behind him and then slashed low at Kakashi's legs. The jonin stepped over the cut, then paired a rising slash.

"Well, done. You picked up on my flicker attacks," Kakashi praised, his posture pausing as Zoro returned a grin, then came dashing in to meet his partner. The two men circled around one another: Zoro was stalwart and strong, equal to Kakashi in pure swordsmanship as the Jonin's evasive habits kept building momentum for his weapon.

Sasuke watched in envy at just how intense the pair were. The scale they moved at was too risky for any novice or intermediate swordsman to partake in. Now the first-mate was pinned down

fending off a flurry of strikes from Kakashi the Jonin pressing the weight behind the blade over Zoro's smaller weapon.

"Wa-Hoo! Yeah! Go Zoro, beat him, beat him!" Luffy rocked in his heels, cheering at the show.

"Come on Kakashi, he's only got one to use! I have chores on the line betting for you!" Ussop joined in.

"Alright, the meal's on the table!" Sanji's call ended their spar, neither man cut anywhere however Zoro panting in fatigue and excitement while Kakashi's wrists were raw. Then one hand landed on each man's head. "Food!" Luffy catapulted over them, using both warriors as a pommel horse. Ussop scurried after him while Zoro shrugged it off.

"Kakashi," the swordsman declared, "whether Naruto wakes up soon or not we're buying those extra swords I need right after breakfast. And Sasuke here is coming with me," the first man declared.

"Oh, that goes with saying," the other man cocked his head, eyes closed in his own smile. "Hopefully, I can find somewhere which offers kunai and shuriken; my cute little Genin and I are getting low."

"Cute? Hh," Zoro chuckled, dropping one hand as his own disciple strode past. "That sounds about right with these kids." Sasuke grumbled but nevertheless did not try and shrug off the hand ruffling his hair.

The smell also coaxed Gin and Sakura back to their feet. While others moved towards the kitchen, Kakashi braved the door to the girl's cabin.

Opening the trap door easy as he could, nobody inside heard or saw a thing. One form was still curled up in bed, while Nami sat at her desk still in pyjamas. While he spied, Nami kept stealing glances at the bed.

The navigator looked over at the window, the ceiling and finally back to her work. 'Things suddenly got quiet up there. Maybe I should-'

"Yo."

"AHHH!" The chair fell back over itself while Nami spun about at the voice right in her ear. Closing her arms across her chest, she look at who was there. And promptly tried to slap him.

"Huh? Yaaww-AAAHHHHH!" Yawning, Naruto sat up to stretch. Scratching his head with both eyes still closed, the boy tried to fight off the grip of sleep.

"Good morning, little brother." Everything stopped, as those words sparked light in his memories of someone else saying the same thing one day ago.

Shooting both eyes open, Nami and Kakashi were both right in the centre of the room. She was smiling and Naruto's mouth fell open before she closed it with a tap on his chin and smiled down to the boy.

"Listen," Nami spoke, "I meant what I said yesterday. If you ever feel lost or broken again, or if anything or anyone bothers you. Come straight to me, okay?"

Azure eyes of wonder stayed transfixed on her own warm brown ones. Naruto himself started shifting. "Uh....nee-chan. Nami-nee." Naruto kept stealing glances up at Nami, with both his arms twitching. "Can I... can I hug you again?"

A moment later, Nami gave her own embrace. "That is something you never have to ask for."

Naruto relished this for several moments, the warmth beating back a further wave of regret. 'This....this is really a hug?... Nobody but Old Man Hokage ever gave me one....Ji-ji... I really want you to meet Namii-nee-chan one day when we get back home.'

Then, Naruto noticed Kakashi was watching them. "Sensei. Did... did you tell everyone in our crew about me last night?"

"Almost," Nami answered instead. Letting go for a bit, she stepped back to face both shinobi. "Kakashi told most of them but Luffy came straight in here without waiting. He wanted to see you himself, so I told him instead. He even ordered Sanji to help you train for fighting and cooking lessons twice as much now. Then he walked out and asked to know the moment you woke up."

With a swallow, Naruto slumped over. "So... what do Sasuke and Sakura think of me. Or Zoro and everybody?"

Kakashi remained neutral before gesturing at the doorway. "All of them were extremely understanding, Naruto. They admire you now more than before. Why not come upstairs and ask them?"

"Oh, and Sanji has breakfast," Kakashi casually slipped, and Naruto suddenly grasped how much his stomach felt empty. "I might recall that Nami mentioned something about a shopping trip. Let's give her time to change or get a bath. Maybe clock in a little training in the meantime."

Naruto nearly tripped over his own feet moving for the trap door. Back up on deck, something delicious hung in the air while Gin and Luffy were both looking outside.

"Don." Luffy looked over at Gin, then followed his nod towards Naruto. "Naruto!"

"Uh... yeah, captain?" Walking over, one idiot was staring right into another; with Luffy's face uncharacteristically passive. 'Would I be like him if I didn't get Ace for a brother?' the Straw Hat pondered. He didn't move, and Naruto merely kept staring up at him, growing fidgety. Until a familiar grin broke out and he ruffled Naruto's hair.

"If anybody glares at you again, just come and get me," Luffy pledged. "Nobody will do that to my friends, and you will always be

one to me no matter what. And you're mystery-powers are too great and you are too much fun to leave behind.
SHhshishishishishishishi!"

"Kid," Gin captured Naruto's attention next, looking down over his young crewmate with respect. "Yer stronger than anyone around, ya hear? Never let anybody say different. Or doubt that about yah self."

Naruto was smiling now... yet it was raw, true and real for the first time in a long time. He didn't say anything, only smiling as it wore deeper and deeper into his face.

"Naruto." A certain Uchiha announced himself, staring directly at 'the fool.' Facing him square-on, the Uzumaki didn't dare to speak while his teammate kept staring, searching him deep enough to invoke discomfort.

"Look, Sasuke I-"

"You really are strong, aren't you?" he finally said. It was the last thing Naruto expected, and the one thing to leave him utterly lost for words.

"Naruto. The man who..." the fellow Genin had to swallow for a moment. "The murderer who orphaned me. Who massacred my clan," Sasuke shared, and tension in the room suddenly grew dense. "He told me that I should hate him, and let that hate dictate everything I did. I followed that without hesitating, and I think you know for how long." Tossing throughout the night, Sasuke recalled how Naruto caught one thing in him during their one-sided spars.

"Now I think," Sasuke continued. "You were strong enough to throw aside everyone's words and become yourself. I bent over for what another person said I should be, and his instructions led me to my worst mistakes. That proves how you managed to accomplish something I wasn't able to. You are strong, and I... am....sorry." Looking down, the 12-year-old slunk away, leaving Naruto behind him, flabbergasted. Nearly the entire world faded into a dense black

haze, with all of Naruto's attention fixed solely on Sasuke's retreating back. 'Sasuke... thinks I'm... that I can be...'

"N-N-N-Naruto?" Looking to his right, the Uzumaki's tunnel-vision cleared to find Sakura beside him now; holding her arm and shifting while her long pink hair covered both eyes. Confused, Naruto started to move towards her, until the girl faced him instead, her face a picture of guilt. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so, sorry."

"I..." She had to swallow a trickle of bile, then recalled how to speak of what she felt. "I used to see how other people treated you but didn't think at all about it. And then I followed the crowd and did nothing, or I added to how much you were hurting more than anybody had any right to; not only here but also back in Hanma village, or whenever you wanted to have company, and all in our time at the Academy. I'm so, so, so, sorry."

More apologies followed, so many that lost track of how many times she gave until he caught a grip on his own feelings. "Hey. Hey, Sakura-chan!" The girl stopped, only to shake at a smile and thumbs-up Naruto gave at her. "Hey, it's all okay now. I mean, nothing like that happened in a long time and right now we're friends, right? Let's look to that and tomorrow, not what happened before. Ya know!"

"Guha-hahahahahaha!" A rubber arm roped around each Genin, pulling them and holding each face cheek-to-cheek with Luffy. "That's right. The past, that's just who somebody was. It's not who they are right here and right now, so don't think about it and go find a new adventure! That's what all of us will do together, right!"

"Right, Captain Luffy, believe it!" Naruto nodded up at him, while Sakura looked from one over to the other, and broke out in her own grin.

"Well-spoken Captain," Zoro announced, coming up with Ussop beside him. The sniper walked over to Naruto and was grinning

down at him. "Yeah, none of us cares about anything else but you and what you see about yourself. Those are the qualities that define men, Naruto, so don't ever go and forget them! To all of us, you are our big, orange, lovable goofball, and our home is right here on this ship. Right?"

"Yeah!" Jumping for joy, pure elation and joy were coursing through Naruto; deeper and more true than ever since the shackles of his repression and desperation were snapped and thrown away. Bonds were building between him and the Straw Hat pirate crew, forgetting anything that would upset them.

Still, Kakashi was looking on, hiding something else in the back pocket of his mind. 'Telling them about the Eight Sign Tetragram Seal and his burden might be too complicated. And, by all the laws that matter, that is Naruto's tidbit to share, not mine.'

'I should give him a few days to enjoy all of this. Then we'll broach crossing that bridge.'

"Alright, come and eat, everyone," Nami called over, clad in a dark teal t-shirt and navy skirt resting on her thighs and matching rings on either hip. "We've got a laundry list of shopping to do. Sasuke, Sakura, Kakashi and Gin can go find the weapons they need, and I'm taking Naruto for the whole day, brother and sister only. Sanji and Ussop, you both stay with the ship."

"And what gives you the right to dictate orders like that," Zoro growled out, moving right into Nami's face.

"Hey back off, Lost-boy," Sanji shot back. "If that's what Nami wants, everyone will follow it."

"See yay!" Luffy waved behind him, then took off running from the ship again, gone before anyone could do anything. "What!?"

Nami had some presence of mind to try her new fallback.

"buda-buda-buda-buda-buda... buda-buda-CLICK. Hey, what's up?" the den-den-mushi on her wrist replied with Luffy's attitude.

"Luffy, where are you running to at the drop of a dime?" Nami demanded.

"I wanna explore again and Naruto's feeling fine," the snail answered. "Zoro's first-mate, you and Old Man Kakashi can handle anything. Why stick around? There wasn't any food left from breakfast." Sanji went pale at the last bit, then shot for the kitchen and seconds later the boat was vibrating from his shout. "GREEDY PIG! That Uncouth, rubber-bastard! That was meant for everyone, especially Naruto and Nami-swan, not just her rubbery, black-pit stomach!"

Nami sighed before glancing over to Zoro. "Usually the captain should direct their own crew," she dryly crewed out. "Luffy even proved he can do it when things get bad, to our immeasurable surprise. But right here, I don't think any more elucidation is necessary. Do you?"

"No, not at all." 8/10th's of everyone answered in unison. Zoro was embarrassed to speak; 'You know something's wrong with this world when I am the one acting that much of an idiot.'

After Sanji quickly revised their meals, everyone finally got food in their bellies. "I've got to prepare that Elephant Blue-Fin Tuna from yesterday, Sanji shared his own plans, "so staying with the ship is a necessity. Actually, after what just happened, Luffy running off instead of stealing more whenever I take my eyes away might not be a bad situation."

"I'll go lookin' for'em." Ussop volunteered. Consent echoed through the room, with the others finishing up and then set off for their errands; Naruto was especially grinning as Nami walked off with him, hand-in-hand.

Ten minutes later and the girl was at her worst inside another clothing shop. "But Nami-nee-chan, I like this and it looks so cool!" Naruto struck a pose, decked with a neon-orange trench coat; his older sister not even sparing a look. "Nothing goes with orange but black, and that is an abomination to all the rules of fashion. If you wear that, I will ban Sanji from any training or cooking lessons for one day." Like a whimpering puppy, Naruto slunk over to put the coat back while Nami wisely did not look towards him. 'I don't think I could say no to any puppy-dog eyes right now. And with his cute whiskers, it'd be even worse.'

Back to her job, she found a bright-blue t-shirt with swirling waves and a V-neck collar. "Ah, this would be adorable, and we'd match!" She added it to the basket taken from the door; already overflowing with her choices.

The next half-hour passed with Naruto forced to try on one outfit after another; answering Nami's proclamations with wonder and questions.

"But you said I look great in this, why can't I have those green pants with this pink shirt?" holding them up side-by-side, Nami rested her headache by caressing her own brow. 'This, might be the single greatest challenge of my life.'

More and more ensued until she finally dragged him out of the store without buying anything. Giving the same lecture forced upon Sakura and Sasuke, Naruto didn't get the point and only kept talking.

"If we finish faster, won't that mean more time for sailing, cooking and training? Or you can draw more maps, nee-chan. Let's go back and get those then, find somewhere with Ramen!"

"Never," Nami dead-panned him, still leading the boy by his hand. "How about this. Would you just get a plain package of cup ramen, or take the time to find the best Ramen restaurant around, then spend the money there?"

The knucklehead thought this over, while Nami herself saw her favourite 4-letter word. "SALE-OOOOO!" With stars dancing in her eyes, the girl took off in a sprint; with Naruto dangling airborne in her wake.

Inside, Nami began browsing all the options; still the impossible happened as she was looking for somebody else and not herself. "Hmmm... okaaaay, but we can do better. AHHH, perfect! Never, I'll let you wear plaid before that. Ah-ha, this might match your headband! No, no, no, no. Ahh....that is a good pick, little brother, you are learning." Nami was beaming towards a black collared t-shirt with orange-shade cargo pants that Naruto was holding up. Nami let him try them on and after finding the right size, bought them on the spot.

Naruto could barely measure how happy he was, not only under Nami's attention but for the common-kindness of other people all around them. After letting out his emotions, the boy could smile back at other people, so long as he didn't stay too long else a pang would form in his heart.

Nami noticed this and kept him moving. He even felt happy helping her make different choices, but disagreed with the more risqué options; 'It feels weird having my sister wear those. I don't know why, but I don't like it.'

Soon they left the store with several different bags each; Naruto even made extra clones to help carry them. More and more, the pair continued visiting shop after shop. They had fun together, Nami glad to see Naruto enjoying himself, even both snatching a few things, and with additional clones appearing with every purchase they made.

"Naruto, I love how much of a big help you are," Nami praised him, leaving her brother a fresh shade of red. "Now if we could only-ah!" Nami saw a furniture store hosting its own sale. Looking between it and towards all the Naruto's, she grinned. Soon the pair were lounging on various couches throughout the store, Nami wanting to

get a wider one for the Going Merry since their crew hand doubled in size from the time Merry and Kaya had given her to them.

Naruto even started bouncing on one, which Nami put a gentle stop to. "Something like that might break it in half, and we couldn't use it at all. Never do that again, especially to someone else's."

At her scolding, Naruto hung his head. "Now don't hide like that," Nami coaxed him. "If someone does the wrong thing, they should look right up towards it. Alright?"

Passing on Bellemere's own lesson to her, Nami made sure Naruto understood then whispered in his ear. "'Just make sure to point other people away from it. If nobody notices, then nobody cares.'"

Soon the pair were giggling together and went back to their shopping day.

Elsewhere, Zoro's group had their own excitement. "Ah, this place looks promising." The First-mate, both Cabin-Genin, and the Jonin stood together before a weapon's shop.

"I hope so, Zoro-sensei. Especially for their quality. We'd get in big trouble if sensei didn't have a second sharp eye." At Sasuke's comment, Sakura swallowed back her shame at a near miss an hour earlier.

"Ahhhh, you really shouldn't beat yourself up, Sakura," Kakashi gently spoke. "Only ninjas who have needed to restock their equipment outside of a village often know what to look for in a good kunai. That shop you found earlier were swindlers, but useless choices and mistakes are part of learning."

Smiling towards her, Kakashi's face fell at how Sakura dropped over herself; curling into a ball of shame.

"You really need to work on your words, Kakashi," Zoro muttered. Looking from them up to the sign, he and Sasuke were both eager to get inside.

"Well, without Nami around, we should be able to get exactly the right stuff without her complaints. And maybe this guy'll have some kunai and shuriken for you four."

"Oh, no, no, no you don't!" Sakura somehow got in front of them, blocking the doorway. "Without any jobs anymore, our money isn't infinite. I get the privilege to screen anything that you buy. Two swords alone are going to cost enough as it is, and we have a whole lot more to get. Kakashi-sensei gets to choose anything he sees, but you don't."

"Oh yeah, why do I have a limit like that?" Zoro shot back at her.

"That's because you want two of them and that'll be double the price. Sasuke-kun can choose whatever he wants."

The pair continued bantering, while Kakashi and Sasuke walked around them right into the shop. Inside, they paused, admiring the variety of weapons arranged on display and even sets of armour going with them. Kakashi especially felt a wave of relief, spotting several familiar killing tools. 'Naginata's, Kusarigama, even Odachi and whip-chains. But there are see several other blades in different styles I haven't seen before.' The Jonin slid one hand into his pocket, pulling out a certain book from his pouch he flipped the pages and started cross-referencing. 'Warriors, weapons and armour. It's a good thing Sakura bought two of these yesterday. I'll have to comb through it in more detail later.'

"Huh? Oh, why hello there, fresh customers." A red-nosed man with wings of black hair to frame his face stood up, rubbing his hands eagerly. "Take a look around, choose anything you'd like, or perhaps you're looking for a specific piece?"

"We're looking for swords, two for my sensei and one for myself," Sasuke announced. "We also need three separate tonfa's, one in a matching set. And do you have any kunai, shuriken or nin.....uh, steel wire?"

"Absolutely, we have a fine collection here," the merchant informed them. "Rapiers, Broadswords, Jian, Cutlasses, Falchions, single-edge, double-edge, even rare Hook-swords. Now looking for tonfas. Those are a less-than-common choice, but this is the only shop in town where you might find any these days. Do you have any figures for a price range between the pair of you?"

"I want a katana. It's my sword-master's weapon so-" Immediately, Sasuke's request was silence as the door got flung open and struck a wall.

The shopkeeper jumped backwards as Zoro strode in with Sakura behind him. "No. You aren't going to imitate me like that, kid."

Surprised, Sasuke looked up at the swordsman. "Why, Zoro-sensei? You use that weapon so it'll be the best one to practice under your watch. I might even train my eyesight to copy your-"

"NEVER!" The shade of a demon pulsed from Zoro, even pulling at Kakashi's patience. The Jonin watched carefully, ready to interject. While Zoro drew his remaining katana from his belt and held it before him.

"I started out in a dojo, then this sword was bequeathed to me. And you aren't just going to take that easy way." Glaring at his disciple, Zoro continued: "I won't tolerate that from my student. I invented sentoryu, it's an extension of myself. If you just try to follow my every step to propel yourself forward, that's not real skill or any strength to be proud of."

"Choose your own weapon," Zoro insisted. "I found what suited me, and you'll do the same. We're going to try out all the different swords here," the green-haired figure gestured around the room. "You can

still learn different moves from me, then tailing with them your own flare and grow into a swordsman in your own right. That is the path towards building your own power, and the personal strength to fall on when you face true dangers beyond your own level. The first step is to choose your own weapon, not have it chosen for you."

Looking away from Sasuke, Zoro fixed his attention on the shopkeeper and jabbed one thumb over at Kakashi and Sakura. "Help him and her out first, then I hope you got a clear schedule for today, cause this might wind up taking a while."

No reply came. It was only then how much everyone noticed the shopkeeper staring directly at Zoro's sword, the one still held in the air.

"S-S-s... s-say now. H-How by chance did you come by that sword? Are you here to trade it in for another one? I'd give you 100,000 for it."

"Hm?" Zoro looked down, then drew back his white-sheathed weapon; a casual but immovable look grew on his face. "Not for sale, and we have enough money."

"Wait, that's not true!" Sakura came in, her arms shooting out at each man to stall the offer. "We... could always use some extra, if you are willing for it. For the right price."

"Oh, w-w-w-well then, c-c-c-c-can I take a look at it a second?"

That answer got Kakashi interested. Looking between the weapon and the salesman, he caught on.

"No." Zoro slid the blade back into his belt with his refusal. "Not for sale, and my word surpasses hers. Now, are you gonna get those weapons Kakashi asked about?"

"Now, now, now, hold on. What if I raised it to 300,000, or gave several swords in trade for this old one. What do you say?"

"Old one? You mean the Wado Ichimonji?" Kakashi slipped in. At that one name, the man went pale as the moon, before searing red to glare at its source.

"Wait... wait a second?" Sakura flipped through her own sword handbook before landing on a certain page. "Oh, here it is? The Wado Ichimonji. Forged by the blacksmith Shimotsuki Kozaburo. One of the 12 O Wazamono swords of renown. Hailing from the country of Wano. Worth: at least 10,000,000 bellies! You swindler!" At the accusation, the man slammed his fist on the table.

"Well that's called business, and I'm perfectly entitled to it. Besides, if that's the standard price then I still need to make a profit on it. Don't even think of starting there. In fact, I might be doing you a favour since all the rouges in town at the moment might target this blade and give you too much trouble."

Sakura thought this over, all until a fist slammed over her head. While shaking it clear, she looked up to find the shopkeeper now had a problem: a point of a sword resting at his throat

"Do you have a name?"

"Uh... uh..lp..." As he had to swallow, Zoro eased off enough to give him the space without stabbing his own throat.

"What is... AH!" A woman came around the corner near the back wall, then came bounding for Zoro.

"No! No, Ipponume." The salesman, inexplicably, was completely calm now. Looking back along the edge of the blade, he met Zoro with a surprising amount of spirit.

"My name is Ipponmatsu. And I am sorry," the merchant apologised. "If the blade is yours and you truly wish to keep it this badly, I won't press the matter further."

Zoro did not move, holding the tension in the room a while longer. All until a tap on his blade sent it to the open air, and his wrist came locked in a vice. "I believe that is enough," Kakashi lent more pressure to his hold, enough for Zorro to wince but still not release his own sword. "Now that the matter is settled. We have a business to complete. Why not look around at different katana that fit your preference, Zoro? Sakura can look over the cheaper merchandise, or wait here to select her own weapons, while Sasuke and I stay with Ipponmatsu-san."

After he let them go, Zoro re-sheathed Wado Ichimonji then flexed his hand, muttering about a sore wrist. "Sorry about that, Sakura," he muttered, then leisurely strode over to a set of blades hung from a wall stand.

"Ah, you don't need to worry," Ipponmatsu assured them, standing more at ease than before. "My shop often has all kinds of rouges: pirates, bounty hunters, big-shot Marines, you name it. Business here slowed down after Captain Smoker drove them all away, but since he left I've had an uptake in sales. Suppose, greed got the better of me."

"Anyways, the cheapest stuff I have are in those barrels there," Ippomatsu pointed over to the vessels, with neatly-spaced arrangements of different sub-par weapons. "All of them have dull edges, but they're the best price if you want to keep the cost low. Ipponume? I'll buy you some extra bath salts if you could get the case of throwing knives from the back."

At this his wife are glaring, planting both hands on her hips. "How do you know exactly how to pamper me into doing things like that!" With that proclamation, her walking back through the doorway muttering about cheapskate, adoring men. Kakashi and Sasuke were both lost over this play-by, as Ippomatsu came around from behind his desk and waved for Sasuke. "Alright kid, let's see what kind of sword you like."

For the next several minutes, the Straw Hats moved around the store. Ipponume returned and revealed she was carrying a surprise.

'These... these are authentic shuriken,' Kakashi grasped while examining one, 'and even kunai throwing knives... wait-.' Holding one up, the Jonin felt their weight and handles before doing the same with a separate one. 'These kunai each have a different balance and edge. While the shuriken are almost ornate. Not the utilitarian ones we have from Leaf Village. Each was probably made by various craftsmen, not mass-produced.'

Noting these differences, the Jonin began selecting each one with the utmost care, disappointed there were not more available.

Sasuke had the most action, testing different swords as Ippomatsu directed him on how each one should be held and used. First, a "Rapier," which he felt like a showman on a stage; not a ninja. The next was a "Longsword," demanding two hands to lift, with a T-shaped cross guard; Sasuke declined, asking for a one-handed weapon. Several more followed, even a straight Jian blade, that Sasuke admired. But Zoro's words rang true within his mind, and he prefer to slash over thrusts.

They continued further and further, until-

"Uh, Mr. Ippomatsu. I think you have some missing stock. There's a legendary sword in here." Everyone turned, while the salesman grew pale with fear. Right beside Sakura, Zoro careened his neck to examine what she'd found.

"This sword. I think it's Kitetsu III," the kunoichi spoke up. "A successor of the O Wazamono sword Kitetsu. It's... quite a famous sword and a very expensive one." After reading from her hand-book, Sakura looked back to their host, while Zoro eased the blade from her grip. 'This blade. It.....what is.....' The Swordsman felt something.

"UH... no, no mistake. Just, put it back, you hear." Beads of anxiety were rolling down Ipponmatsu's face.

"Well," Sakura had a gleam in her eye, "if you're really selling it for under 50,000-"

"No. You-you don't understand, I can't." Panicking now, Ippomatsu nearly ripped extra tufts from his hair at the strain. "I put that blade there so nobody would notice it. I unconditionally cannot sell it."

"Why? It looks like a good blade," Sasuke cut in. He was about to ask more, but Zoro got the place first. "Looking underneath the underneath... This sword. It's cursed."

Now the shop went quiet, even the Hatake giving his undivided attention to Zoro as the teenager angled the blade to the ground.

"Huh? H-how did you know that?"

"I just... do," the swordsman answered. Everyone, even Ipponume leaned in, looking between the two men and the sword.

"Well, you're right," Ippomatsu confessed, "The Kitetsu swords are superior in all respects. But they've been cursed since their beginning, you have to believe me. There are stories from all over of master swordsmen, legends in their own right. All of them met their end after taking up a Kitetsu sword. Nobody is stupid enough to even touch them, these days."

"Hh. A curse on a weapon? It sounds a little far-fetched," Sasuke snarked at the explanation.

"Oh? Like Devil-fruits," Kakashi casually dropped. "Or men who are part-fish, part-human? Or how a genie's wish altered our lives completely? Turning aside from near-mystic subjects seems rather reckless after what we've encountered, Sasuke." As usual, Kakashi enjoyed trolling his student, leaving the younger Sharingan wielder

completely silenced. Yet the majority of his attention remained on Zoro and the blade,

"Well, sounds like one of you has some deep wisdom," Ippomatsu continued. "If anyone else decides to take that blade, they might fall to its curse. I'm scared to let anyone buy it. I'm afraid that curse will come back to me too. Just put it back and forget about it."

"Hh. Nope,," Zoro replied, grinning like a shark. "I'll take it."

"Zoro, that sounds terrible; don't do it!" "Sensei, you're acting like the captain." Sakura and Sasuke each declared, while Kakashi, did nothing more than cock his eyebrow.

"Didn't you listen?" Ippomatsu had turned white. "I can't sell that sword you fool! If I do you'll die, and the curse might come back to me!"

"Oh, shut it," the man's wife complained, knocking him over the head.

"Well, then. Why not we put it to a test," Zoro declared.

The swordsman's proclamation left the others bewildered. Looking around, all but Kakashi felt something freeze their legs in place.

"Sasuke," Zoro declared. "Whatever happens now. I accept the risks," Zoro spoke as he turned the Kitetsu in his hand. "Hide your eyes if you want. Or watch."

Zoro strode away from Sakura and stood in the empty centre of the shop. "Let's find out which one is stronger. The sword's curse? Or my good luck?"

Then he casually tossed Kitetsu III to the ceiling! Everyone assembled gasped, then First-mate closed his eyes.....and raised one arm straight in the path of the falling sword!

"WHAAAA!" "EERHHK-No, you stupid-!" "Reckless!" Kakashi was the last to speak, cursing himself!

"Do nothing!" Zoro's command echoed through the room, still holding his limb out, unmoving and emotionless as a marble block. Sakura made to dash in but ran straight into Sasuke's outstretched arm.

"Sasuke-kun, we-" "SHHHHH!" silenced by his hush, everyone followed the trail of the falling cursed blade. Lower... lower... it's spinning edge scything through the air... Zoro remained still, unmoving, utterly committed. Within his mind, the only image was the blade, the only sound he heard the edge slicing the air; sharper than a razor, thinner than the wind, ready to easily remove his arm.

Nothing around him had any form; only himself and the sword existed.

Kitetsu III was honing towards him. First, its shadow came for his head....next the tip aligned with his collar straight to his heart....and finally his arm at the shoulder. Spinning over itself-it was level now, the tip millimetres from skin.....the blade rotated over Zoro's bicep....falling around him to land in the floor.... Harm undelivered.

No.....body.....moved. Sakura couldn't even cover her mouth, as her legs gave out and she fell backwards to the floor. Sasuke....the intensity of how he nearly lost a friend, a mentor, and a guide was paralyzing. Only for the weight of reality to flood his consciousness. The awe and emotional intensity... one of his eyes was changing.

Kakashi was utterly immovable....his sharingan was out, in time to spot the blade falling around Zoro's limb and what he'd just witnessed had been seared into the man's memory; something to follow his thoughts for a lifetime. 'N....not even any hairs were cut. Neither... were they even raised. Zoro-sensei, he was... completely calm.'

Zoro opened both eyes and was grinning towards Ippomatsu. "I'll take it."

"Hhhh... hhh.....hhhhh...." Sakura tried to grasp her bearing; while Sasuke gasped, and as Kakashi looked at him the Jonin caught something.

'His eyes. Three tomoe, and two?' Glancing over at Zoro, the Jonin made a silent groan as he grasped what had just happened.

Ippomatsu had fallen to the floor, while his wife still had her hands over her mouth. "You! Wait here!" The shop owner went scrambling to the back room, while Zoro drew the sword from the floor planks. "That's one down for me. Sakura. You have a good eye. Keep looking around, maybe you could find another one."

"That won't be necessary. Please, take this!" Looking over, the ninjas and swordsman could see Ippomatsu brought a sizable package down, covered with a purple cloth. Removing it, even Kakashi did a double-take at the quality of the blade unveiled.

"It is covered in a black lacquer finish. With an uneven temper pattern. Come here, draw the sword and see for yourself!"

Zoro shrugged, walking over and soon the blade was in his left hand. Nodding at its quality, he looked over at its current owner. "It's light and sharp. I like this one too. How much?"

"Hmmm," Ippomatsu was grinning now; showing a pride that hadn't been there beforehand. "For you. No charge, Kid. I haven't met someone like you in ages."

"Our shop, is small. But this is the finest sword I have. I never sold it to anybody, nor ever made an offer before. Been saving this for an owner who proved they had the mettle to carry it." Dipping his head towards Zoro, Ippomatsu was grinning. "You are a true swordsman in every sense of the word, I can see that now. I'd merit that you're more than worthy to carry Wado Ichimonji as well; alongside this sword. It is called the Ryo Wazamono Yubashiri. You must have some damn good luck friend, the swords are yours for no charge."

Zoro agreed with a shrug. While Kakashi took the distraction to pull himself together, finishing the sale on the kunai and shuriken. "My students and I train to use these weapons, and we honestly need the lot. I'll take all of them."

Both the husband and wife nearly fell flat on their faces at this offer, even more so when Kakashi pulled out enough money and then sealed the collection away in a scroll.

While the couple were muttering 'Devil-fruit,' Sakura came forward with her own order while Kakashi pulled out Gin's own tonfa. Ippomatsu happened to have a matching one as his last in stock and brought out a regular set in a package. Kakashi himself tested all of them, finding the weight and balance points did match Gin's, then passed the other set to Sakura.

She held them tightly in her hands, thumbs curled under or resting on top of the Tsuka-Gashira cap, shifting her forearm in line with the Shomen under-strip and trying different stances Gin had been practising.

It was awkward but expected.

"You will certainly need a lot of time before they'll become fluid and reliable weapons," Kakashi coached her. "Still, those can be used to defend and attack in several ways. And few people use them, leaving them unprepared against enemies who do wield these with skill. Since they're metal, that could go a long way towards anyone who comes at you with a sword. And if Naruto's testimony holds any truth, you can hit very hard when you want to, Sakura. A bludgeoning weapon like these will focus and complement that."

In a blink, Sakura fell from curious to depressed; folding in her knees but still holding the weapons.

'Did I....say something?' While the Jonin pondered, Zoro smacked his head. 'Great job, Kakashi. Really good way to remind her even more of Naruto's tough life and her own regret's over smacking him

around.' Stepping forward, Zoro paid for the tonfa's and congratulated Sakura on her choice, raising the girl's mood.

All that left Sasuke, with the undivided attention of the weapons merchant. "No worries kid," Ippomatsu assured him. "You aren't leaving here without a sword to match you; that I promise." Further browsing ensued Sasuke tried more and more swords, even some katana he'd eyed after stepping in, but none of them matched his preference completely; only several close-to-the-mark that Zoro insisted he not settle on.

"You need to have no sliver of doubt. Feel more than think."

This continued, all until a specific weapon came to Sasuke's hand. Styled similar to a katana, this one had a straighter edge and was some inches shorter. After taking it up Sasuke somehow felt, at ease. One part of his mind recognized the style, on the uniform of his unspoken older brother; but following what he felt over what he thought, the Uchiha came to a surprise.

The weapon had a stripped hilt, patterned white and navy; with a crimson guard treated with lacquer and the blade carried an unusual temper pattern. Sasuke turned it over in his hand, stepping away to give experimental swings, followed by thrusts, then recovered to a guard position. From the sidelines, both his senseis nodded.

"Well. It looks like you found your own blade, Sasuke," Kakashi smiled at him. Turning around, the Uchiha looked straight over at Ippomatsu. "This one. This is the exact blade I want."

"Hm. Good choice. That there is a Ninjato. Similar to a katana, it's got a straight edge over a curved one, leaving it moderately thicker than other weapons of it's style. Plus it's lighter but the steel doesn't sacrifice weight or strength, courtesy of it gōmai^[1] forged steel. That one even has a name of its own: "Kazoku Shugo."^[2] It's yours."

Sakura came up and paid for Sasuke's sword, while the Uchiha took the weapon and its sheath. Turning them over in his hands, the boy

felt....strange. 'This. It's one thing that I chose. Something unique to me and will influence how I gather more skills; all towards my goal. No, my goal and...' He decided to think more about a second concept in his head later.

Together, the group thanked the owners and strode out of the shop, Zoro and Sasuke leading them with confidence and satisfaction. While Sakura and Kakashi followed them, and he glanced up at the skies. I wonder how Naruto and Nami are doing together?

The answer: not well at all. Once they left the furniture shop the pair continued their day in search of lunch.

"What do you mean we can't eat here? Is that any way to-"

"No service! By... popular demand." The cook inside a Ramen restaurant blurted out at Nami. The girl stood in front of Naruto, with a glare boring deeper and deeper into the difficult man. While looking around the dining-room, every pair of eyes held revulsion towards the pair.

"N-Nee-chan. Lets... let's just go." Naruto mumbled, and that did it: Nami started swinging! The guy before her landed on his back after 6 fists turned his face black-and-blue; followed with another three more bastards inside arm's-reach of the Navigator.

"Alright, now don't say a word and clean the gunk from your ears!" Nami hauled her victim to his feet with both hands, nobody daring to come to rescue him after the demoness's rush. "First, nobody mistreats my little brother in front of me; he's already had to suffer enough in our lives from filthy bastards like you." Nami felt a mental prick, of Bellemere doing a similar thing when boys had complained about her in her childhood.

"Second, both of us are part of one pirate crew. With the Marines absent for the moment, who can really stand up to us at all? Or to other pirates who might come here for a meal? Third and final, I do

have money to pay and Ramen is his favourite meal, so we'll each have one bowl to start. Deal?"

A shadow was covering her face, with a crimson flare of hell masking her eyes and mouth, daring the restaurateur to refuse. The same man glanced over to find most of his customers had dropped cash on the tables and were gone, and those still left in the background but did nothing.

"UH.....alright, ma'am."

Slowly, Nami set him back down and took a breath. 'Man, how can somebody be that unreasonable?'

"Alright, come on over Naruto. Let's eat." Walking up to the bar stool, she was surprised when he didn't join her immediately. Looking back, Nami found her younger brother looking forwards wide-eyed and shocked. He stayed there for a moment before she walked on up to him. "Naruto? You okay?"

"Uh....um...." he mumbled something out at her. Drawing him over to the counter, Nami sat down herself and asked again with worry. "I'm afraid I didn't hear you Naruto. What did you say?"

"Thank you....nee-chan..." looking over at her, one bright smile coloured with trembling lips replied. "This is kinda like what used to happen to me, but nobody ever stood up like that for me before."

"Hey, that's a big sister's job," Nami grinned, leaning over with her hands on her hips. "Nojiko did that same if anyone bad-mouthed me or Bellemere too, or she'd turn around and do the same anyway."

"

"Really!" The pair got to talking more about Nami's own family before their meals came. She took the time to enjoy it, and barely got 1/8 finished before Naruto asked for another one. At 5 more bowls, Nami

put her foot down. "That's enough, our wallet isn't bottomless and you need some healthy food too."

"But Ramen is too good, nee-chan. Come on, just one more bowl. Pleease!" Folding both his hands together with watery eyes, Nami nearly broke. Nearly. Instead, she paid and walked out with Naruto.

Still, their trouble did not end there. Further outside, glares, whispers, and fear continued circling them both. And the longer they walked the worse it grew: parents would herd children out from their way while others glared over towards them.

"Whitchy sea-bitch." "Hey, what was-" "Bastard!"

After one person spat a curse at Nami, she whirled about but Naruto acted first; flying at the other man like a wrecking ball. One solid kick had that poor sod spinning off right into a wall.

"Nobody gets to bad-mouth my sister like that, or any kind of woman at all in front of me," the boy proudly declared. "Come on, why is everybody getting mad all of a sudden? We haven't done anything bad right here, are you all just listening to some stupid rumour?"

That brought a halt to the mood hanging in the air. A few people glanced around to their friends who shared their reasons around; fear and paranoia found themselves muscled out by guilt.

"It don't matter at all." From further up the road, things got bad fast; two brigands in shiny new clothes strode out towards them, holding a sword and spear ready. "Nobody can get in our way, and that hot piece of ass is too good to pass up," one man licked his lips at Nami. A handful of blocks away, another two were in a similar predicament. "Uhh... hey, hey Gin? Why's everybody looking at us like we kicked a puppy, or just want us to do them a favour a disappear?"

Ussop looked around to the crowds engulfing them while the rouge marched on. "No idea, Ussop; and Ah don't really care much for 'em

either. Maybe Don Luffy crashed into anotha buildin' and get'em grumpy."

"That's true. Let's hope not," Ussop deadpanned, walking on. Nonetheless, the mood surrounding them persisted no matter which lane they walked along. 'This kinda feels like after I'd run through Syrup Village shouting about pirates. What could'a happen to stir up this big a crowd?"

"Oh, hey guys!"

"Huh, oh Luffy!" right up ahead, their captain waddled towards them; his stomach illogical swollen to wider than he was tall.

"Uhhhh, did you enjoy a big lunch or something?" Ussop asked him.

"Uh-huh, I sure did. Still, some people were chasing me around and around and I don't know why," the pirate laughed, patting his greedy stomach.

"You... didn't wreak the place at all did ya, Don Luffy? Some people 'round these parts are statin' to give us the stink-eyes."

Luffy only frowned a smidge; "I don't remember," scratching his hat. "I think somebody shouted after me about money or something. I didn't have any so I figured it wasn't about me and took off. Shishishishishishi!"

Gin smacked his face, while Ussop almost fell over. "Dine-and-dash. Why am Ah not surprised?"

"I just hope this doesn't cause trouble for Nami and Naruto," Ussop drawled.

"Trouble!? No way, nobody is gonna do that!" Luffy shouted, looking left and right. "I'm coming, Naruto!"

"No, Luffy!" Too late, defying all logic Luffy got thin again and took off before they could stop him. Running down one road, then another,

and another, until he found a crowd assembling and sounds of a fight up ahead.

Inside said crowd, Naruto and Nami were indeed fighting back-to-back.

She just whacked somebody sideways with a long bo staff assembled from pieces hidden in one, compartment, then glanced about and spotted another leaping from behind herself. "Nee-chan!" Turning, Nami panicked at an iron chain swinging out but-

"Gum-gum: Pistol!" one fist hit the guy first, sending the fool spinning over the sidewalk. Nami followed the fist until it snapped into place and Luffy was charging forward mad as a bull. "Who's trying to hurt my crew this time!"

Drawing back another fist, he threw it passed Nami's shoulder to punch away someone else from Naruto. The Genin dropped and spun, his heel knocking more guys off their feet then he went somersaulting over to his sister. "Nice timing Captain Luffy, just like the hero in a story, getting there in the nick of time!"

"No way, I'm not any hero," Luffy exclaimed. "I just beat-up guys who hurt my friends!" Spinning one arm in circles, for some reason just having him there sent the thugs scrambling in terror.

"Come on, we ain't got no chance against him, again. Let the captains handle that Devil-fruit freak."

Just as quickly as it erupted, the fight came to an end. Luffy shrugged and then looked over at his crew. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Naruto answered first, while Nami needed longer. 'That guy really almost got me, but Luffy came in the nick of time, again.' Smiling over at him, Nami broke apart her bo into three smaller poles and walked closer to Luffy. "We were alright, but thank you for the save, Captain."

"SHishishishishi. Oh, no problem. You know that Nami." Both the pirates stayed there grinning at the other, one with a little more feeling than the other. Until a sniper and Man-demon caught up.

"Wha, the? Did we miss a good fight?"

"Yes, excellent work Luffy! Rushing to the rescue, just like I suggested you do!" Ussop's declaration went unnoticed while the others look about.

"I don't know why," Nami observed, "but everyone suddenly got especially hostile towards us. Maybe we should head on back to the Going Merry, try and find-"

"Attention Everybody!" from nowhere, a large announcement sounded through the streets. "Should Straw Hat Luffy be anywhere, this is a Flashily challenge for him to man up as a real Pirate Captain. Half your crew are right before me and moments away from becoming flashily destroyed by us. Come on out and settle this instead of hiding from my challenge like the coward who you are! You shall find us in the plaza right where the Great Pirate Era began from. This is a challenge from Buggy the Clown, to that treasure robbing runt Monkey D, Luffy!"

Nobody moved. "Sakura, and sensei, and Zoro, and Sasuke!" Naruto exclaimed. "Somebody got them! Who'd do that" "Gin." Luffy turned his gaze towards one of them. "I don't know who this Buggy guy is. But which way is this plaza from right here?"

"Uh... that way Don," Gin pointed one finger "If we-"

Luffy ran the other way, back up the road opposite to the plaza. "Luffy-" at Nami's cry, Luffy kept running, then pivoted and cast one arm up overhead of his crew, latching to a chimney's top. Then a spring sounded, and the group found Luffy's other arm encircling them, snapped all four together and raised them off the ground to hold under one arm.

"Huh-what-no-!" "Luffy-don't-!"

"Gum-gum: Rescue Rockeeeeeeeeet!" with a leap, Luffy launched himself to the sky with half his crew flying with him.

"WWOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Naruto shouted with glee.

"I thought you were gonna run there Don," Gin complained. "Luffy, you're going to crash us into the sea!" Ussop cried, while Nami had comical tears falling from her eyes.

"Oops." Luffy cocked his head, then stared down below him at the rapidly shifting landscape. "plaza, plaza, plaza... ah!" Next, the idiot spun around, throwing his free arm to the ground, caught something, and turned his face grinning at his friends. "Let's go rescue them!"

"How?" "NOOOOOOOO!"

"Alright, tell me again why got stuck right here!" Zoro complained, loudly. He was standing with all three swords with 12 beaten goons at his feet. To his right Sakura and Sasuke were also surrounded by downed enemies sprawling over the floor, while Kakashi stood on the first mate's left, glancing behind them.

"Well," the Jonin answered him, "somebody here walked off on us, got lost 3 times, we found him that same number of times, until the 4th disappearing act happened."

Zoro winced, clenching his teeth around the sword in his mouth. "I told you, I heard Luffy and was looking for him before that idiot could stir up a riot!" Nobody believed him, Kakashi even patted his head and continued drawling on. "Sakura suggested coming back here, again and that impossibly beautiful woman over there," the Jonin gestured, "declared she wanted revenge on us for something. That was how this fight began. Until you tore through a wall of these ruffians from one alley."

The four of them were still surrounded and outnumbered, with Gold Roger's execution platform behind them, and a mottle crowd in front, lead by a very shapely beauty resting an oversized club on her shoulder.

With raven black hair framing a flawless heart-shaped face and clad only in pants and a white bra, Kakashi couldn't help staring at her alluring features. 'This feels like something out of Lord Jiraya's novels.'

"Why is it that anywhere we go," Sakura complained. "Someone just always winds up attacking us out of nowhere?" Sakura complained her words at odds with another opinion in her mind.

"Grrrrrrgrrrrgrrrrgrrrrggrrrrggrrrr! How are somebody have such big boobs everywhere while we're stuck with these tiny ones? DHOH-NOOOO! I just confessed my boobs are tiny!" Inner-Sakura was pulling at her hair.'

"Oh, you are far beneath even my conceit," the enemy leader declared. "But the four of you can lead me to the one I desire. Oh, boys! Who is the singular fairest woman to sail any a sea?"

"You are, beautiful!" her followers roared in adoration. "And what should happen to anyone who dares to raise their hand on any part of me?" Shifting her profile, one hand moved over her heart, making her assets tantalizingly bounce. Kakashi felt himself itching for some ice water, while Sasuke's face matched the same dead-pan gaze as his other sensei, while Sakura appeared pensive, hiding how much she wanted to ignite.

"I'll kill them!" "Who'd dare upset the epitome of beauty!" The other pirates exclaimed. "Their manhood should be cut and hung off from the mast!" "Enslave them, to only kiss Captain Alvida's toes! Everybody, charge!"

A stampede came for the ninjas and one swordsman. But Sasuke had an idea. "Zoro-sensei, wait one moment."

"No way. Whatever you're doing brat," Zoro spoke, grinning like a hungry beast as he raised his own weapons, "leave it in my wake! These swords are in need of a test run." In seconds Zoro met the charge with his own, cutting one down, then the next, a streak that left two's and three's of his foes falling in a spray of blood. "Hawk-wave!"

With a shrug, the Uchiha followed him, cutting down any left behind until his teacher stopped. Pivoting, Sasuke sheathed his sword, freeing both hands to fly through different signs then drawing in one breath: "Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!" The erupting inferno finished off any left, while Zoro himself looked up from it, then to his student, and finally back to the swords; Kitetsu III. 'I didn't intend to draw blood from anyone.'

"You're something of a troublemaker," Zoro hissed. "A good sword should only cut when their master directs it to," glaring down, he turned the edge to see his own reflection. "You may be sharp, and cursed. But you will follow my will from now on."

The other three were ignoring him, as Sasuke's fire-jutsu ended with several foes burnt in its wake. Elsewhere an unseen apparition was weaving through anyone who stopped to look at the flames, picking them off one by one; save for three who found their legs swept off the floor and knocked out with solid steel to their skulls.

Kakashi stopped just short of Zoro, appraising at his student's handiwork. 'Sasuke's fireball was too excessive, Zoro already dealt with them. We still don't know why they assaulted us.' He glanced over at the men Sakura tripped. 'She really is learning quite fast, those basic manoeuvres wouldn't work against more active enemies, but Sasuke's distraction created an opportunity, and she took it.'

"I... I'm sorry boss..." one man with two burnt left limbs crawled over to where Alvida stood. "This... you deserve stronger men than me. I'm sorry that-"

"Stand back boys, and pick this one up." As her men obeyed, Alvida strode forwards, tapping her club over the shoulder it rested on. "Looks like that Mr. Monkey D. is not the only one special among them. Buggy! No holding back!"

Zoro's face crawled with horror at this news. "Hey wait, when you say 'Buggy' do you mean-"

"Attention Everybody!" All throughout the town, a separate voice rang from across the plaza. "Should Straw Hat Luffy be anywhere, this is a Flashily challenge for him to man up as a real Pirate Captain. Half your crew are right before me and moments away from becoming flashily destroyed by us. Come on out and settle this instead of hiding from my challenge like the coward who you are! You shall find us in the plaza right where the Great Pirate Era began from. This is a challenge from Buggy the Clown, to that treasure robbing runt Monkey D, Luffy!"

Right up on top of the Execution stand, another figure in bright and tacky pirate clothes had a transponder snail in his hand, complete with an orange cocked hat sporting twin blue tufts on each end, face paint in lines across his brow and cheeks and one giant-

"What's up with that red nose. Do you know this... clown, Zoro," Sakura spoke up. "He looks real strange." While inside of Sakura's head: *"Chaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That looks ridiculous, the picture of all things ugly!"*

Said clown froze, then his head slowly came with a burning white glare in his eyes toward Sakura. While close by, Kakashi was whispering to Zoro. "Is, that the same Buggy, you and Luffy spoke about, Zoro?"

"Yeah, and if we never ran into him and his wack-jobs again it would still be way too soon. I need you or one of the kids to take that guy, my swords don't work on him at all."

"They most flashily do not!" Buggy proclaimed. "Cabaji and Mohji, go in now!" Two individuals came out from behind the Execution platform while the circus clown came flying right towards Sakura and Sasuke, cackling as knives in his knuckles gleamed in the sun. One low and hungry roar mixed with a rhythmic tweaking tickled their ears from a certain direction, too.

"Scatter!" On Kakashi's orders, a lion tore Sakura off the ground right in his mouth; Sasuke grabbed Zoro before getting impaled from behind, and Buggy thrust his knives right into Zoro's chest.

"Gyahahahahahahaha! So, you still flashing suck at dodging, don't you Mr. Pirate Hunter," the clown smirked at his fresh pin-cushion. Yet... 'What the? Why aren't my knives coming out, or any blood trickling in his shirt?'

The next second, one solid stump replaced Zoro's body. Sasuke did the same too, leaving Buggy's weapons stuck deep in the bark. While the Lion meanwhile spat out one long metal pole.

"Huh?" None of the pirates moved until several men near Alvida went flying and she found a single weapon resting on her throat. Next, the Lion fell over sideways, with its paws tied up in wires nearly too thin to see, "Richie!" As a tamer ran to his partner, the rest of the bizarre and beautiful pirates caught themselves, with several dozen copies of a certain pinkette appearing all around the plaza.

"Hehehehehe, maybe you should wait before running on us," each of them chorused. Leaving the pirates beyond any kind of stunned. While Buggy felt something or someone behind him.

"Don't move. This fight is over." This voice of death itself stopped Buggy cold until he found a small kunai pressing on his throat. "I'm not certain what-"

"You think that can hurt me with that! Chop-chop: Surprise!" Buggy's head flew right off his shoulders with its neck attached. Then the head went floating right for Sasuke, shocking the boy who held

Alvida at knife-point. "Sasuke, dodge kid!" The boy rolled off his target passing right through two Sakura's and making them dissolve into mist. As the illusions vanished, Buggy's body spun around, nearly catching the Jonin in a bear hug, yet Kakashi slid out of the way. Flipping back to put distance from them, Kakashi looked back while the head and body reattached themselves, creating a foot-less pirate clown floating in the air.

'Just how many bizarre abilities do people here have?' Kakashi groaned, with exasperation in his eyes.

"Ahhhh! That-that-that-head-up-floating-talking-whaaaaat?" Sakura whined from her place, beside Zoro.

"Well, great work kid, you just ruined our ambush," the first-mate grumbled to her.

"Bu-bu-bu-but-Zoro-san-but he-"

"Relax," Zoro spoke with sympathy, his eyes still on the battle. "This is one case where I'll forgive you screwing up. That big-nosed dumbass is even more of a whack than our Captain, after you see him for the first time. Buggy's got the Chop-Chop devil-fruit, so he can split his body anywhere, and nothing with an edge can bother him at all."

"Gyahahahahahahaha!" Buggy swung around. "Very good Bounty Hunter. And with the pretty Alvida right here, all four of you are about to die! Alvida, take the runts and the tall one. Zoro is mine! Chop-Chop Scatter-Shot!"

Every piece of the pirate clown's body burst apart, flying right for Zoro. While Buggy's compatriot made her move, throwing off the cape and snapping one set of fingers.

Sasuke let loose several different shuriken through the air for Buggy and the slicing edges merely passed through their targets creating extra pieces of Buggy to fly right for them. A few spare thugs came

for the Uchiha, while three ordinary men set up a ramp while Alvida's shoes disappeared and she stepped over a fourth to reach the top.

"Keep him busy boys!" Pointing right for Kakashi, the acrobat on a unicycle and lion-man charged him, while Sakura looked around until she noticed something.

"Aw crap!" Zoro grimaced as the clown made right for them; "Now, here your face the flashily, terrifying hurricane of-"

"Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!" A second inferno erupted, this one moving straight for Buggy. Zoro smirked and stepped back, while the clown lost his cool. "AHHHH! What-Huh-no-OOOO-burns, burns, burns, burns-" More followed as the clown kept patty out flames and soot, so Zoro spied more thugs running for him. "Sasuke," Zoro called over, "keep Buggy under fire. I'll mow through the rest."

Meanwhile, Kakashi wove around his attackers, parrying with kunai and letting them press in

"Slip-Slip: Open-stage Delivery!" At impossible speeds, the pirate lady sped down the ramp into a rapid glide across the dry, hard ground. Her mace was cocked back for a wall-breaking hit aimed for Kakashi, and the ninja found his enemies pressing in before they dashed away; ignorant of exactly who they were facing.

'She'll land directly there,' Kakashi measured, 'then I can duck under the club and give a solid kick to remove her from the fight. Guess I'll have to think up an excuse for Sanji.'

Even without his own special eye, the Hatake had no trouble evading the club, yet when he spun around his leg slipped over and around her body with no solid impact as she sped right on past him.

'... so, she must have a devil-fruit, too,' the Jonin realized too late.

"Hahahahaha! So... you buffoon never heard of the Smooth-smooth fruit before?" Alvida called, winking at him over one shoulder with a

cute grin. Some men behind Kakashi fell over, himself almost among them; almost.

"This is the reason I have grown so beautiful, especially since my freckles all slid right off from me," the pirate lady continued.

"Anything I touch will slip, even something so unbefitting as your kick. Boys! Set him up again, then we only have 9 to deal with."

Kakashi took stock of what they had: 'This might be tough. Sakura and I'll have to take her and that clown together since he cannot be hurt by anything which cuts. Alvida wasn't hurt by kicks or fists, but perhaps a blade will do? Zoro should try against her, or maybe-'

"WOOOOOOOOOOO!" Above the skirmish, a familiar call coaxed several eyes to glance up at the sky.

"Luffy, you're gonna hurt all of us!" "Shadow-clone jutsu!"

Looking up, Zoro smacked his head, while Sasuke and Sakura both paused. Kakashi wanted to act until he saw no reason to. With the other half of their crew under one arm, Luffy collided right into the crowd of pirate underlings with dust clouds erupting with impact.

'Damn it Luffy! Are the other four... still alive?' "Hey, Sasuke. Zoro. Why did you guys all start a fight without us? Ya know?" At that call, the first mate turned and found Gin, Usopp, Naro and Nami behind him, with several shopping bags between them. "What! How'd all of you get there, from there!?"

He was pointing back towards Luffy's landing zone, where the dust cloud was clearing away to reveal dozens of KO'd pirates left and right. Plus a certain butt high in the air with its chest buried in the concrete and two legs pressing to get their upper half free.

"Nice save with those shadow clones, Naruto" Sasuke complimented.

"Hhh?" Zoro didn't have to ask, as Kakashi appeared beside him to explain. "Naruto made clones, then the clones each substituted with one of the others before Luffy came crashing in."

"Hey! Hey, you! You stupid, lying thief! What brought you all the flashily way here?" Buggy's shout cut between the crewmates, and he was pointing directly at Nami. Meanwhile, Gin glanced between Buggy, then Luffy's lower end, and Zoro.

"So, y'all really did beat th' Immortal Clown, huh Zoro?"

"All of that aside, you all chose a perfect time to come here. Gin," Kakashi looked over, reaching for one scroll. "Here's the tonfa that I promised you," In a puff of smoke, the weapon appeared and was flying for Gin, who caught it easily. "Buggy is immune to edge weapons, so put that to good use again the clown. Zoro, I need to trade with you for that woman, she's got a devil-fruit of her own, too."

"HEEYY!" Luffy had pulled himself free and was looking all over the place. "Huh? Big-nose? What are you doing here? Do I need to hit you again for hurting my crew?"

"OOOOOOOOO! DROP THE MATTER OF MY NOSE STRAW HAT! YOU'RE EVEN WORSE THAN SHANKS!" Buggy's own pieces circled through the air, his feet travelling down to join a reassembling lower half beside his crewmate. "Still, now that you are here we can settle things or good, especially my unfinished business with that treasure-stealing sea-bitch Nami and-"

"Hey, nobody says that about my sister!" Naruto roared in return, as Luffy got back on his feet and cocked one arm, ready for a brawl. "I'm gonna hit you so hard you never come back, stupid clown. Even that girl beside you too."

"Girl? Now that's just rude. Did you of all people forget my face, Monkey D. Luffy?" she asked, sauntering forwards while Gin had hearts in each eye. "You were the first man who ever truly struck

me." One hand came low to cross over her stomach, while Luffy cocked his head even more.

"Even though it felt so good, both Buggy and I, the Iron-Mace Alvida, share unfinished scores with you, Monkey D. Luffy."

"Iron Club Alvida?" Gin's mouth dropped over, letting loose the deluge building there since he laid eyes on the promiscuously clad captain; the cowgirl hat almost right out of his fantasies. "She ain't looks nothin' like her wanted poster."

"Luffy? Do you remember her?" at Nami's call, Luffy finally noticed Alvida, then began rubbing his chin while he looked her up and down at. "Nope. I never met her before. But I got a bone to pick with Bogger the Clown."

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Ussop and Naruto both bent over, shaking at the name. "Really? Bigger the Clown, and that's his pirate name? Shouldn't that be scary, cause it's a pretty bad one," the coward declared.

Up above, Buggy grinned right for his enemy. "Still rude and mean as ever, aren't you Straw Hat? Now it's time to flashily-GGGGGHHHHHHHHH!" All the pieces of the froze uproze-up again, dangling in the air. Buggy had his mouth wide open and was not moving at all.

""Ahhhh-aaahk-ow-again-my-balls, my, balls, why right there agaaaaaiiiin?" the cranky clown croaked. Down below, his audience were starring up bewildered. "Ah, Sakura!" Naruto's shout pulled their attention away, and everyone spotted the pinkette with her right foot planted square in Buggy's manhood.

'Please tell me she don' plan on makin' that a habbit," Gin siletnly prayed. Sasuke in the meantime grabbed Ussop and Zoro out of the way as each piece of Buggy hit the ground.

"Damn cheap shots," the clown moaned. "He's down, everyone, fight off the enemy pirates!" Sasuke's command ignited the rest of the crew, and they all made for their enemies.

From a short space away, Alvida felt something meet her cheek, then slide off-course and exploded on the wall.

"Huh, M-m-m-m-my exploding star," Ussop cried. "No way that missed, but how'd it get over there?" Then two particularly giant windmills came flying for the enemies of the Straw Hat crew. Sakura had disappeared again, all until someone thrown by Luffy collided with something unseen; the kunoichi skidded with him out over the concrete, dropping her tonfa's on the way.

Cabaji and Mohji were jumping to get away from two flying saw-blades, neither hitting anything as they sped back to the Straw Hats. Sasuke caught them as Luffy and Naruto finished, him running over to Sakura while Luffy glared over to Alvida.

"Pssst. Luffy?"

"Huh? What Old-man?" Kakashi stood beside him, whispered something quietly then stood back. Luffy looked over, then to his crew and shrugged. "Well, okay. Gum gum-Whip!" The leg extended, arcing just outside of range from Naruto at Sakura; Buggy didn't get hit down on the ground while his men leapt over Luffy's attack, save for the lion who went flying into Mohji.

When suddenly explosions shook the plaza. More dust surrounded the group as the Straw Hats each covered their faces.

Once the area cleared for the second time, nothing was left of the pair except for a conspicuous grey dome right where they stood.

"Huh?" "What was all that about?" "Kakashi. He made that wall," Sasuke announced, his eyes on the chakra traces of the structure.

"Earth style: Rock Shelter jutsu." Gin, Nami and Ussop all leapt to the skies at the voice right beside them. As ever, the Jonin ignored them while waving to their captain.

"Very nice distraction, Captain Luffy. That jutsu should leave them enclosed but it often takes some moments to rise and escape from. They should be stuck inside for a short while, so let's return to the Going Merry. We have to plan our next move and ensure nobody tries to attack Sanji either."

"How could you do that! Captain or not, there is no acceptable excuse!" Sanji was fuming as he kept slamming his heel over Luffy's head with each syllable. "Why... did... you... hit... a... lady... Luffy!" They were back aboard the Going Merry, and somebody made the mistake of asking when Luffy met Alvida right in front of Somebody. The same Somebody driving one kick over the Monkey's rubber brain with every word, almost driving Luffy overboard.

Zoro jumped in next, sparking a full-out brawl between them: "Enough, this is not a time for chivalry, curly-brow!"

"You're overdue for an ass-beating, too, moss-head! And major lessons in common courtesy!" Sanji rounded on him. "No man should ever strike a lady, that's been around longer than dinosaurs! Now-"

"Knock it off!" Nami drove two hands between them both, Sasuke and Naruto joining in to hold their own teachers back.

"Sanji-senpai, Kakashi-sensei wants to talk, ya know. You and me, we'll beat up the First-mate together later, believe it!"

"Huh?" Silence followed as Sasuke looked over at the yellow-haired duo. "Loser, what are you dreaming of now? Zoro-sensei would destroy our cook at anything, I've been watching Sanji since the Baratie and if he were stronger Zoro-sensei would no longer be our first mate."

"Nuh-uh, Sasuke. Sanji-senpai is way, way, way better. He'd never make someone else so directionless and lost they'd stomp into a girl's changing room like you two did yesterday! Pervy-sword-boys!"

At that, the crew went dead silent. The student-teacher pairs looked right at each other. Sasuke and Zoro felt a certain pressure building, while Naruto pouted towards them and Sanji's entire body twitched.

The students of the sword looked over to Nami, standing with her mouth open before landing one smack on her forehead. 'Why did you say that! I didn't mean for it to get thrown around, only to cheer you up after lunch, Naruto.'

"You... lucky... BARBARIAN!" Sanji and Zoro met head-to-head, at the same moment Sasuke and Naruto did. "You both wanna go right now, swirly brow fool!? See who's the better fighter and the better teacher!" Zoro challenged. "Take that back, Loser!" "No way, it's the honest truth, Sasuke!"

Luffy, Gin and Ussop stood side-by-side, cheering on the sidelines. "Go Zoro! Show them why you joined me first!" "Come on Sanji, you and Naruto got this!" Even Gin hoped in. "Eh, Sanji I'll put down 20,000 on ya!"

"No."

Someone appeared between the rivals, both hands up to separate the pairs. Kakashi was ready and set for a fight: his wild wiry hair, lanky form and one dead eye stopped both the elder ones in their tracks. Sasuke and Naruto were transfixed, not even twitching.

"I suggest you both step away for now. Unless you would prefer for Sakura to end you both the same way she chose to against that clown? Our... Manhood slayer Sakura?"

With a shudder and a gulp, Zoro and Sanji both slid their hands to protect something very precious to each. Sakura look over, blinking from the mast as the name clicked.

"Huh... huh-what-how-no, no, Kakashi-sensei, please don't call me that," her hands waving forward.

"CHA-AWESOME! That'll teach anybody not to mess with us!" Her other half declared. Before both sides of the kunoichi could argue though, Luffy sealed the deal.

"Manhood-slayer! Cool!" Several different heads turned to a particular idiot. "That sounds bas-ass, and Sakura gets an awesome nickname. Yup, good idea Kakashi!" Luffy declared. Any thoughts about fighting vanished at that moment, as 7/10th's of the crew once again were blow-away by just how stupid their captain could be.

"Alright," Nami eventually took over, "Now that we're on to important matters, I think we should set sail tonight before that group can try anything more."

"Oh, not quite," Kakashi interjected. "Zoro and Sanji were not the only reason I came down here from the crow's nest. Look," pointing far out into the bay. As the whole crew look over, a particular, bizarre pirate ship was departing into the night; three masts, a canon inside a model elephant, with a single pirate-jolly-roger on its sail. The image held a large red nose, matching the real Buggy's.

"While the two with Devil-fruit powers were challenging, they did lose several dozen men in that fight and may have decided to leave."

Gin stepped forward, while Sakura stood beside her still-unmoving teammates. "Kakashi? Your certain they're on that ship? Don Krieg often used a bait-and-switch, havin' one ship sail off but leaving more behind."

"It's possible," the Jonin nodded. "But, after we departed from the plaza, I left one clone behind to watch them. It took some time before the others under their command could dig a whole wide enough for that Avlida to slip through. After they were free an argument followed before the groups just sped right back to that boat and cast away

from the pier. So, we likely do not have any worries tonight and can leave around mid-day tomorrow."

While the Jonin-sensei pondered, everyone looked around until Luffy made the final say. "We beat them, so no reason to run after and fight nobody. And I'm hungry, too. Sanji, let's eat."

The men nodded, especially Gin as he walked over to Sakura about more formal lessons as she now had weapons all her own.

But... somebody forgot something.

Nearly 1 hour passed until Luffy bumped directly into Sasuke. "Huh? Sasuke why aren't you moving? Sasuke?"

"Not just him!" Nami cried, pinching Naruto by his shoulder. "My little brother won't move either!"

"Genjutsu," a jonin replied, scratching one cheek. "I cast a paralysis genjutsu on them both to stop the fight, since those two can still fall under it and I wanted both hands to keep Zoro and Sanji apart."

Chuckling at his own forgetfulness, after letting his Genin move again Kakashi slipped away and pulled out Icha-Icha: Tactics. While Naruto went to help Nami with her maps and Zoro took Sasuke aside to start training with their new swords. Luffy and Ussop held a contest, throwing things up for one to hit and grab with their different skills in the fading light. Dinner had some entertainment as Luffy told everyone how he met Alvida. Although nobody would believe what Alvida used to look like until Gin pulled out a wanted poster he'd nabbed from the town that day.

"Uwggggghhh! Is that thing even a woman or whale?" Naruto exclaimed, and it cost him one kick to the gut from Sanji. After dinner, chores and a strong goodnight from Nami to Naruto, Ussop and her together had the night shift and all was quiet and calm.

The next morning was uneventful; a normal day entirely as they prepared to leave. Kakashi had been watching out into the bay and no sign of any ship linked with either Alvida or Buggy came back before Usopp and Nami decided to make some last-minute window-shopping before they left.

"I need to feast my eyes on everything this town can offer before we leave," the navigator gleefully chimed.

"Feast? A feast? Yeah, that is what we need!" Luffy declared, dropping his fist into one hand. "This is a really big matter! I decided to go to the Grand Line and have 10 people at least on my crew! Now we've got that many, and it's out last night here! Let's all find a restaurant and celebrate!"

Jumping from the deck, not even Kakashi could stop Luffy when he'd start thinking with his stomach. With a groan, everyone looked around and gave a shrug.

"What's the worst that can happen?" Sanji asked them all. "Usopp and Nami-swan can do their shopping, then meet us at a restaurant. Why don't we find some place first and they can meet up after?"

Unanimously, they left behind another Naruto shadow clone platoon and moved further into the town as one large group. Still, nobody turned out to be friendly in any way, glares, distance and a few curses met them left and right. By the time the crew got their captain, he was inside a restaurant beside a wizened old man in a purple torque.

"This young lad here, he's the real thing. Nothing like those cowards or fools that others were. It may be one week late, but I'd like the honour that day by having him and his whole crew eat here on that card game table the owner owes me. What say you to that?"

The restaurant owner looked between them all and sighed. "Come on in then, what'll your first orders be?"

"I need meat!" After walking in, the older man sat back down with everyone while Nami, Naruto, Ussop and Sakura walked off.

"You know, we don't need you two to come along if you're hungry," Ussop politely told the ninjas.

"Nu-uh, after everybody keeps glaring at us, I'm not letting my big sister go out alone." Naruto's pledge left Nami smiling, but she leaned over to whisper something in his ear.

Ussop watched it, surprised at how no matter what got thrown their way, Naruto seemed totally unbothered at all. 'I wonder how he can take it all so easy, after what happened the day we got here. Does just having friends and Nami as family, really make this big a change?' Ussop and Sakura both shared the same thoughts while they kept walking.

While the quartet strode along peeking through separate store windows, the other Naruto stood ready by the Going Merry. One looking around to the harbour when "AAAH!"

"Huh? "Hey, not cool, ya know." "What's going on?" "Pirates and ninjas neither shout like that, believe it!" While most berated their copy, the screamer pointed right for the open sea.

"Marines! The Marines are back!" All the different ones looked-and there it was. A massive warship, marked with a prow shaped like a bulldog. Thralls of men ran across the deck, some even dropping boats filled with more Marines to get inside the harbour. The Naruto clones on deck were scrambling together with ideas. "We have to get to everyone and get out of here!" "No, let's stay here in case someone steals our home! This ship is our first real home, believe it!" "How about we sneak up close to them and see who's there then go get our nakama?"

They agreed on the last one, then spent 3 minutes drawing straws to see who's have to stay behind and took off right along the wharf.

Back with the original Naruto, he was beside Sakura and Nami as they looked gushing over jewellery in one display. "Those diamonds would be perfect with the outfit I got yesterday."

"Oh boy, I can't wait to get to the Grand Line and find such treasure to wear; and all of it without costing anything," Nami was bouncing so high nobody would guess she and Naruto weren't related.

"Too bad that shall never happen," one slick, austere voice announced to them.

"Gyahahahahahahaha! Now our Flashily Revenge begins!" Nami's blood froze. Sure enough, right above them was Buggy the Clown again, sneering down with knives in hand. Whirling around, she tried to shout but Naruto and Sakura both fell.

"Ahhhhh!" "HHHrr-RRRRHHH!" Cuts opened between both Genin, spraying blood through the ally as Sakura and Naruto both dropped, their knees meeting the ground, hard.

"Stealth-Foot." Right beside Ussop, a black-clad figure came to a stop; his round glasses were obscured with shadow, and ten katana blades dangling around his hands. Rising up to glare straight at Ussop, the sniper fell over backwards.

"Huh-Whay-Klahadore?"

Five blades pierced the Sniper's leg, his pain announced to everybody there, civilians frozen in place or backing off where they could.

"That alias shall only incite my anger further, you repulsive filth. Now your execution is scheduled and demands such attendance promptly." Drawing his cat-claws free, the newcomer spun around the glare over at the navigator, as she tried to hit him with her bo-staff.

"Captain Kuro!" Nami missed her mark, the man bending around while one leg stuck out from the alley. Nami slipped clean over it, tumbling across the pavement to a slow stop. Pushing herself back up, she could only watch while Captain Alvida and Buggy were both fighting with the Genin and Kuro snatched Ussop away.

"Alright, time to go, all according to plan!" At Buggy's word, both he and Alvida were moving off, her sliding out over the cobblestones while he flew in the air. "Be careful not to drop my feet, Pussy-foot!"

"No, Ussop! We're coming for you!"

"No, Naruto!" Nami grabbed his shoulder before he could leave. "That third man was another old enemy, Captain Kuro. He's a murderous and scheming pirate captain. We have to get the others, and plan together; I bet he wants us to just run straight after him."

Pulling out her snail, the girl dialled their numbers, until Naruto froze in place again. "Marines!" He shouted. "Nee-chan! Nami-nee! The Marines are here, they just got inside the harbour. And led by some real, real strong guy called Garp! Believe it!"

"Naruto, this is no time for wild stories." Sakura shot at him.

"Come on, just look for the bay, you can see it from that road!" Pointing only a block away, Naruto ran over, giving Nami and Sakura no choice but to follow. Sure enough, after stepping around the corner, they saw it.

Sakura staggered backwards while Nami barely kept standing, their eyes on the massive warship down the lane; a behemoth measured to the Going Merry.

Things just went from bad to worse, Nami felt lumps and weights inside her head growing; the same kind as when she lost it over Arlong's treachery, but not to the same extreme.

"Garp! You.....are you certain that's him, Naruto? That's the name of a famous Navy Hero! One of their best, like a really dangerous man for any pirate to meet!"

"Yeah, that's what one of his guys called him. I don't know how but I just saw one of his men saying that up-close before he flew up at me with a real-hard punch. Wait....."

Raising both hands, Naruto held his head, the rusty gears inside his brain stalling as it tried to think; hurting him quite badly on their way. "I don't know. Something flashed inside my head after Ussop got taken away, believe it. It just popped there, and my memory stops after this guy and some real big fist hit my head. I-I don't think I imagined it, and it feels too real but I'm right here, ya know!"

"Then let's not worry about it now!" Nami declared, drawing up her snail again.

"Not our snails!"

Sakura snapped, closing Nami's forcefully. "I read a book last night on them, and some can be used to intercept others. If you do send that message, then the Marines might hear it and trap everyone at the restaurant. We have to run back there.

In a second, Nami agreed, and all three took off at a sprint.

Elsewhere, three particular captains were running for the plaza, their leader giving no hint of the excitement or satisfaction he felt. "All the elements for my plan are set, including how this imbecilic refuse of a human may entice the further plebians of that mob into this trap. Following which I will gleefully spear 5 blades through his heart."

Back inside the restaurant, everyone was laughing, drinking, or stuffing their mouths. Until their nakama burst through the doors.

"Kakashi-sensei!" "Luffy, Ussop's been kidnapped!" One look at the group and everything hit a steel wall. Luffy leapt first, knocking the

table clean over at how cut and bloody his Cabin-Genin were.

"What, who keeps hurting my friends!? I've gotta go beat them up right now! Then we're leaving, this stupid town isn't worth staying in if they keep hurting us!" Gin and Zoro both held him down while Kakashi darted up to see about their injuries. While he bandaged them up, Nami went right to the first mate.

"Zoro. Buggy and Alvida weren't alone. Captain Kuro is here too, and he kidnapped Ussop!"

"Awe crap! Not that maniac, again."

"Kuro. As in Kuro of a Thousand Plans?" Gin asked him. Zoro and Nami both told them what happened, her adding in how Buggy and Alvida were with him and were back in the town. Kakashi listened in as he finished with his Genin.

"There's more, the Marines are here too! And some really, really, really big man called Garp!" Naruto announced, loud enough for everyone inside to hear. Including Luffy.....

"I see," Sanji nodded, his teeth grinding as the situation turned over in his mind. "They might have taken Ussop as bait to lure us out. And I'll bet that fight they started yesterday must have been a ruse. Do you agree Kakashi?"

"Yes, but thankfully, we did not show all of our skills or abilities," the Jonin nodded, dead serious. "They don't know about you for one thing, Sanji, and we ninjas have more tricks up our sleeves."

"That won't matter!" A patron shouted out, stepping forward to face the pirate crew. "No pirates are going to get away today. Not if Garp the Hero is here in town!"

"Hero? Who's he?" Naruto asked them. A question Sakura answered.

"Oh no!" she cried. "Garp the Hero. I know of him from a book that Chef Zeff had. He's a Marine Vice-Admiral, and somebody who had more fights with the last King of the Pirates than any other Marine around. That man is a legend, and a monster of the Grand Line!"

"Hmmmmmm," Kakashi deliberated. "All of that aside, we need to save Ussop, fast. If these Marines do capture Buggy, Alivda and this Kuro, it could be more difficult to save Ussop from them and escape from Loguetown. If they follow a pattern from yesterday, an announcement should come declaring where they will try to kill them; then we can run there with all of us ninjas on the rooftops. Calling them out could spark a fight while we snatch Ussop away and then disengage to reach the Going Merry and sail out."

"Captain, what do you think?".....

... no reply came. that was the moment everyone noticed Luffy was trembling, paralyzed, and utterly filled with fear.

"Luffy? Uhhhh... you're not freezing up on us now are you?" Zoro asked.

"Don, what's disturbin' ya?"

"Come on Luffy, we need our captain here!" Sanji snapped at him. "What's gotten into you, I know you only got to eat a carp but this is a bigger deal than food!"

"Carp? Garp? Garp? Garp? Garp? Grandp-" Luffy repeated slowly, sweat forming a waterfall down his face, drowning out a certain instinct that somebody was just one wall away from him.

"Nami? Naruto? Did you just say, Garp? And that's he's here? Like right here, in this town?"

"Yeah, Garp, believe it," Naruto shouted, impatiently. "But what's up with that, you can beat him captain then we go save Ussop!"

"BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! You really think one tiny pirate can beat me at all!" A new voice bellowed from outside. Followed by something bursting through a wall!

Chunks of wood, brick and more were flying everywhere, a dust cloud with them to highlight where the sudden force came from. Shouts of shock rang around, the Straw Hats braced against it, and Luffy yelled in horror!

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO! I-UH-HEY-HEY-HEY-YOU'RE AT THE WRONG PLACE! THERE'S NO MONKEY D. LUFFY HERE AT ALL!" he shouted back, desperation clear to everybody's ears.

"OH? Then how come you know his name, then?" That same voice sent back, a powerful base tone with the strength of a tsunami. It was clearly old and matched the Titanic monolith coming into everybody's view. The man was half a person taller than Kakashi, dressed in a smart white suit and his head was hidden under dog-styled mask. Stepping through the massive hole he made as the dust settled, the tell-tale cape and symbol for the Marine declared who it was.

"Aw-crap, the Marines got here already! Wait, Luffy? Where'd he go?" Zoro cursed as he drew his swords, Gin levelled his pistol and Sanji get ready to kick. All of them were ignored though, the new arrival kept looking around the room until he found one table. Raising one hand to his lips, the man casually breathed over his solid fist.

"TH-th-that's him! That this Garp-guy? What do you want!" Naruto shouted back at him.

"For somebody to come be a Marine already. And how stupid can you grow, kiddo? First, you try at lying to me, then just hide under a table?!" Faster than a flash, the brick wall of a man flew right past everyone straight for Luffy. Kakashi, with only one eye, whirled at him, 'That's fast!'

"LUUUUUFFFFYYYYYY!" Landing, a left hand shot through the table and yanked Luffy from underneath it, holding him high by his shirt, with the right hand cocked back.

"Fist of LOVE!" A wreaking ball nailed Luffy dead in the head, launching that head across the dining room and through another wall before his neck yanked it back. "OW!-OW!-OW!-It hurts, that hurt's so much!"

"How could, but our captain is made of rubber. No punch should hurt him at all," Sakura spoke aloud, as a melon-sized lump grew from Luffy's forehead, red and steaming from the hit.

"There is no defence against a fist of love!" The Marine declared, only now removing his mask. Showing off a grin all too familiar to the Straw Hats and Team 7, yet none could place it.

Kakashi was already moving, until a new announcement came.

"Are you ready to be a Marine now, Luffy?"

"Huh? NO way GRANDPA!"

End.

Cut, stop, and wait for the next one.

I felt this story did not have enough action across so many chapters; this one would start ease, and then building to a BANG! The next chapter will have all the rest; a three-way fight with previous enemies, if the Straw Hats can do what Luffy, Sabo and Ace never could and slip away from Garp.

I also have one particular moment planned out; Dragon is not going to sit on the side-lines, no leave without some words to the crew.

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter and get ready for some major fights in the next one.

[1]- Japanese forging techniques are labelled by the number of layers of steel arranged during the smelting stage. Including "Go-mai" (5 layers) or the more widespread "San-mai," or three-layers. Both involve stacking individual strips of steel, with lighter ones on the outside and the stronger, denser sections in the middle, then packing them arranged in these layers into a billet, then heating said billet in a forge. When forged properly, the layers meld together so the thinner sections lend sharper edges and the denser sections remain enclosed in the centre. It's usually done in 3-layers, 1 in the centre and 2 on the outside, while rarer pieces can have 5-layers of steel done together within the blade.

[2] -"Kazoku"=Japanese for "Family." "Shugo"=a Japanese verb meaning "guard" or "protect." "Kazoku Shugo" =guard of the family.

The Spirit of D

Growth Through Chaos: Chapter 20: The Garp, the Monkey and the Dragon: Spirit of D.

Or: "No plan will survive a Monkey D."

And it's finally here! Darn this chapter was a tough-stretch, but the wait is over. There is a lot coming up in this story, so grab a snack, grab and drink and strap in for a wild ride!

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts" = images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please, Read and Review. I really, really like Reviews.

"I'm finally a pirate now and it's too much fun to stop Grandpa!"

"How many more times have I need to say what I want for my Grandson!?" Monkey D. Luffy and Monkey D. Garp kept glaring at one another. Then-

"WHAAA
AAAAAAAAAAATTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!" - the audience behind them exploded, with such an uproar the whole building hopped right off the ground, shaking with the echoes and shock from a 200-ton surprise. Eight stupefied troublemakers had dropped everything, even Zoro lost his grip on his swords. The entire ensemble was spiralling over this new incredulity.

"D-D-D-D-Don Luffy! Did ya jus'... jus' call... this man is-?"Gin held up one shaking figure, his spirit a total blank. "Luffy," Sanji shouted, "you seriously mean to tell us this guy's your grandpa!?" The cook's shock was clear as his voice had blown his hair back, showing both eyes. Beside him, Kakashi's eyeball was a balloon: wide, round and floating in the air. Sasuke wasn't moving, yet beside him, Naruto jerked his face between both Grandson and Grandfather.

"Luffy!" The last shout weakly came from Nami, both arms limp at her sides. "You....act... actually have a-a... a Marine Vice Admiral for a GRANDPA?!"

"Would all of you quiet down!" Garp yelled out. "There's something I need to do right here, right now!" He was leering at Luffy, while the pirate kept glaring up from under the welt on his forehead, hiding the terror at what he knew would come next. "No more waiting. Come'ere and hug your Grandpa!" Garp sang, engulfing his grandson in his arms, hugging the teenaged pirate off the ground, and singing his praises.

"Luffy! Somebody told me about you and that bum Arlong! I'm so proud of you! My Grandson went around beating up Pirates! That's the best news ever in my life!"

Captain Kuro looked out across the plaza of Loguetown, his arms folded and one foot tapping from atop the execution stand. Beneath him, Buggy and Alvida stood before the scaffold, with Usopp mumbling over his leg wound at the Pussy-foot's feet. Others were moving about, as the "man-of-a-thousand-plans" glared at the rabble surrounding him.

'Those imbecilic pirate rabble fell for our ruse flawlessly. The town's people gave them no warning of us after my little whispers turned the masses against them,' the self-proclaimed genius continued gloating. Then he eyed his two "allies" at the foot on the platform. 'These idiots did well drawing out the crew with their challenge to measure the strength Straw Hat Luffy may have acquired. Since

he... destroyed.... my plan for Miss. Kaya.' Curling one fist, reminded of his failed investment, it took a notable measure of will for the perfectionist Kuro to not surrender to his murderous impulse.

'The fools were rendered entirely blind to my ruse of sailing out to sea, then returning late in the night with a separate boat. The final success of their lives in completing my plan before I kill them. Alongside the carnival filth Buggy and Alvida,' he silently spat in his mind.

Glaring left and right at his partners, Kuro nudged his glasses up with his palm, then pressed together both hands behind his back. 'The populace here failed to provoke any kind of fight with that Monkey D. fool, or any others under him; as my plan called for them too. I shall kill each of the people in this town as well for such complacency, then slip away into my complete retirement and leave such disgusting a disposition as piracy alone, forever.'

'This plan, my plan, is in the final stage, to end with the death of Monkey D. Luffy to the utmost perfection.'

Zoro, Nami, Gin, Sanji, Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, and Kakashi all kept watching as the Marine Vice-admiral swung Luffy left and right; gently and with prideful tears in his eyes. The scene was so random and loving, juxtaposed with the explosive entrance, nobody knew what to do.

"Oh, boy, this is the greatest gift I've ever had," Garp sang. "Wish I'd been there to see it myself, Luffy. Didya have fun, tearing up that Saw-tooth bum, Arlong?"

"Fun? There wasn't any fun there, Grandpa." Frowning again, Garp let go so Luffy could stand up on his own. "WHaaaaaat? What're you glaring like that for, kiddo? I heard you beat the guy and his whole crew in some big throw-down. What, did he steal something ya wanted to eat?"

Luffy only shook his head, with a face hard as granite, while recalling Arlong. "Arlong hurt my nakama. One Marine who was friends with him shot my crewmate, too. And worse, he locked up another of my nakama for eight years after killing her mother. Nami got so hurt by him she stabbed herself with a knife through some ugly tattoo Arlong forced on her. Then, middle of our fight, Arlong tried to back-stab my cook, too."

A fire grew in Luffy's eyes, making the onlookers swallow but not bothering his Grandpa. "There was no fun in that fight at all. I kicked the guy's ass and wrecked his dreams so bad they'll never happen, ever."

High above him, Luffy watched his visitor glowering down with the presence of a wight he was painfully acquainted with. But somehow, this focus was not aimed at him.

"HHhhhhh," Garp let a deep breath out. "Yeah. I got that part of the story on the way here. All how one corrupt Marine let those fishy bastards run around and did nothin'. That skinny shrimp had no place in the Navy, just like I told him after fishin' him outa the sea."

"Huh? You found the guy Grandpa?" Luffy cocked his head. "I don't remember where he went," Luffy muttered, rubbing his head with one finger.

"Well, he wound up on my ship. It was fun to scare the toothless line of piss. Until he ruined his own pants," Garp answered. Finally reaching a point where the other Straw-Hats recovered their wits; especially two that came running straight up to smack his captain's head: "Get back to the real point here, Luffy! You're honestly saying this Navyman is your Grandpa!"/"What kinda crap is that to drop on us outa nowhere!" Sanji and Zoro both shouted at their captain.

"Hey, is this guy how you got real, real strong, Captain Luffy?" Naruto called over before Nami snagged him and planted herself between him and Garp, protectively.

"How can somebody as loud as Captain Luffy," Sakura cried out "keep quiet about this?" Said Captain looked between all of them, until somebody else tapped Garp on his shoulder.

"Pardon me, Mr. Hero?" "What?" Garp shot, as Kakshi held both his arms up, placatingly. "My family's here," the hero complained, "and it's been a while see we've been together. Whada ya got a stake in this?"

"Only towards the honest truth. How is our danger-loving, glutenous, loving, half-a-brain pirate captain your grandson?" Kakashi asked, calm and cool as ever.

"Old Man, be careful!" Luffy seized his ninja, his cook and yanked each backwards, catching Zoro on the wall until they wound up in a pile behind him. "Listen," Luffy commanded with fear in his tone. "Zoro, Sanji, Nami, Gin, Naruto, Sasuke, Sakura, Old-man. No matter what, don't try to fight this guy. He is my Grandpa, and he'll kill all of us if we do. Just like he almost killed me over and over again when I was little."

Sasuke's mouth hung totally open, looking from one Monkey D. to the other. 'Almost killed him? A member of his family did that? Like Itachi did to me and our clan?'

"Kill you! Like how Haku's Dad did to him?" Naruto cried out, Kakashi and Sakura both twitching at the memory.

"Who th' Hell is Haku, Naruto?" Gin asked him, his weapons now put away under the captain's order, yet both eyes fixed only on the Vice-Admiral.

"Now, now," Garp spoke up. "Don't go lying like that, boy. Where'd you get that kinda I wanted to kill ya, Luffy? I wanted you to get strong. Sure, I did throw you down a ravine one time. Before you got these devil-fruit powers and couldn't swim out from the rapids at the bottom." Luffy winced at the reminder.

"And I left you in the jungle overnight a few times too," Garp continued, picking his nose. Another explanation, and another memory made Luffy gulp.

"And sure, there were those times I sent you sailing off on those balloons." Luffy actually shivered at that one.

While some of his crew put two-and-two together from recalling a certain giant bird.

"But I never did any of that to kill you," Garp reasoned. "I did it to make you man. And even before that, you were fighting with Apes and Monkeys in the forest after training with me. You lived through it all and got strong, so why go around whining and lying about it?" Garp finished his story, and Luffy did not turn his sight anywhere else. While the assembly to the family stories were digesting new revelations.

"Huh. Well that might explain a few...." Zoro muttered, then corrected himself. "Scratch that, it definitely makes a few dozen things about Luffy clear. And why he's missing half his brain sometimes."

"Maybe," Nami agreed, "and why he keeps throwing people left and right. Or how Luffy can keep taking so many hits while he's fighting on."

"And it makes sense for where Luffy's strength came from," Sanji muttered. "That and how he can just shrug off anything somebody throws at him."

"How can someone who was enemies with the last King of the Pirates have a grandson who dreams of becoming his successor?!" Sakura proclaimed.

"Weren't this kinda craziness suppose 'ed be on th' Grand Line, not outside of it?" Gin asked the world, shaking his head with rolling eyes.

"Hey, what the ruckass about?" Garp shouted over at them, throwing both his arms wide. "All of that was to make Luffy a Navyman, and now it's gonna happen right here! I bet all of you'll do fine as Marines, or even stay together as a crew in the Navy with Luffy!"

"No way!" The Straw Hat owner declared, planting both feet in the ground. "These are my crew, and all of us are gonna be pirates!" forgetting who he was shouting it. "They have their own dreams too, and we all want to go and find them together. That freedom won't be there if I follow what you say!"

"You ingrate! And after making me so proud! What's left your brain so wrecked you can't think!"

"I think fine. You're the guy was bad ears." "You ain't got nothing to say about my ears!"

And on the back-and-forth between Grandfather and Grandson continued.

While Naruto slipped closer to Nami. "Nami-nee. Did Luffy really not say anything about his Grandpa? Ever? And what kind of power does a "Vice-Admiral" in the Marines have?"

"Naruto!" Sakura hissed, before pausing a moment. 'That... is a good question.' Nami took the window to answer. "No. He never said a word. Come to think about it, the only part of his past Luffy does ever talk about is Shanks. And now... think we can see why."

"Maybe," Sakura muttered. "But still, this man is a Vice-Admiral. Within the whole Navy hierarchy, there are only four individuals with a higher position: the Fleet Admiral and three Admirals. People call them the ultimate power-houses of the organization. Vice-Admirals are one rank below the Admiral and are still seriously powerful. The Navy itself does encompass the entire world... maybe that would make the Vice-Admiral Rank equivalent to a "Jonin" in the Ninja World, while the Admirals are the "Kage." This man might be as powerful as Zabuza-san, or Kakashi-sensei."

"Drop this fool's idea, boy!" Garp thundered, silencing any other conversations. "There are more scum and cut-throats all around the oceans, hurting who knows how many people. That Small-fry Buggy the clown is one of them, or the idiot Don Krieg. Heh, 'strongest man in the world?' I'll bet the fool doesn't know the first thing about who actually has that title. Why not show 'em who's the strongest by fighting them under the Navy's flag?"

"Nah, Booger the Clown is nothing," Luffy answered. "I already beat-up that guy. And Bastard-Krieg too, after he wanted to take a restaurant I was eating at and tried killing my cook."

"I already got those guys, Grandpa, so why go and fight them again?"

Slowly, with many anxious people watching, Garp's face twisted with awe. "Whaaahhh? You... you mean you went and nailed so many already?"

"Yeah, so what? AAAAHHHHHH!" Luffy got yanked off his feet, Garp reeling him in before rubbing his hair and clapping him on the back. "That's my boy! Just a month out from setting sail and you cleaned every big name in the East Blue down the drain! Atta-boy!" Garp kept praising them, then pushed Luffy away and landed a solid punch on his skull. "Now come be a Marine!"

"OWWW!" Luffy exclaimed as a fresh welt grew over the one he'd gotten earlier. "Mad at me or happy at me? Why can't you pick one?"

"Psst. Naruto," at his shoulder, said Uzumaki found Kakashi kneeling behind him, and holding one hand to his ear. "Do you want to pull a prank?" the Jonin whispered.

"Darn it boy!"

"AAAAHHH!" "Captain!" Zoro and Sanji had to catch Luffy while he rolled backwards, smacked by Garp so hard a third welt grew on his head.

"Drop that 'King of the Pirates' idea, little punk!" The Marine was shouting again, his fist raised and ready for another shot. "How many times do I need to punch you until you finally join the Navy!"

"I'll take them again, and again, and again Grandpa! It's not my fault you never listen when I decided to be a pirate!" Luffy declared, back on his feet.

"Damn that Red head!" Garp exclaimed. "What right does that fool have to go about telling anybody they can be a pirate if they want to!?"

"D... Don't you dare bad-mouth Shanks!" Luffy glared back. "He saved my life, and always told me I won't make it as a pirate. I'll show him, and you SHUT-UP!" Luffy kept staring down his Grandpa, for all of three seconds. On the fourth, Garp snatched him forwards, holding his Grandson high by the collar. "Shut up, huh! What kinda thing is that to say to your Grandpa!?"

"Uaaah! I'm sorry!" Flailing in the air, Luffy strained to get free until a cloud of smoke engulfed him. Naruto appeared in place. "Stopping picking on my captain, he's awesome, believe it! So-" Mid-way through the speech. Both Luffy and Garp threw their heads back, snoring with bubbles of snot high in the air.

"WHHHHAAAA-they're ASLEEP!" Zoro, Sanji and Gin each shook, their tongues wagging and eyes pointing out into the air. "In... deed," Kakashi muttered. Then made a silent high-sign to Naruto. "Everyone," the Jonin pulled their attention away. Suddenly, smoke engulfed the room where the Straw hat pirates stood. When it cleared, all of them were still in place, their eyes darting left and right, and nobody made a move.

A "POP" clapped through the room-"Huh?" Garp asked, shaking his head. Oh no, did I fall asleep again?"

"Yeah, you really did old man." Luffy had answered him, glaring up at Garp, then blinked and shook his head. "I, I mean, I'm sorry! I'm

sorry Grandpa, I'm sorry!"

"Excuse me?" at his shoulder, somebody pulled Garp's attention away, right over to somebody with a shade of hair slightly darker than his light gray. "I'm Inu," the figure with a mask and one eye explained.

"It looks like Luffy forget to introduce his crew to you, sir. After all, shouldn't you know who joined him if you want all of us to come into the Navy with him? Especially since we are ninjas."

"WHAAA! Ninjas? Ninja'? Get out of here!" Garp whirled about. "Looking over the crew his grandson had been standing with, and picked out three kids wearing head-bands which matched the one 'Inu' had lopsided on his head brow. "Seriously. Luffy, where did you go and find ninjas? How in all the world did my Grandson get ninjas to sail with him, but not me? I thought those were only found in the Wano Kingdom! Everything outside the Grand Line is supposed to be right-side-up, not backwards-side-down!"

"Well, it is a lengthy story," Sasuke drawled out. "Somewhere between a shark, a sea cow, a peg-legged man and a Hawk carrying a sword, Captain Luffy demanded to have us on his crew."

"Uh-huh, but before them, my first nakama was Roronoa Zoro. He's right here." Luffy lopped one arm around Zoro's neck, pulling him close.

"The pirate-hunting brat?" Garp questioned. "How'd-WAIT!" Garp spun about, with his full attention back on the boy in his grip. "Who the hell are you!"

Immediately, the Marine swung a fist, then a second, a third, until all of the Straw Hats were hit hard... hard enough they exploded in smoke.

"Where did Luffy GO!"

Several blocks away from Garp, the Straw hat crew, all 9/10 were still running away after getting 'Substituted' out.

"Naruto, that was excellent. Especially getting away in that window while Mr. Garp was asleep." Kakashi praised him. Thinking back to their escape.

"Now let's hope that-"

"Huh? Uh-oh... Kakashi-sensei, the jig is up!" Naruto cried. "My clones are gone!" Then the Uzumaki threw his head back, with both hands pressing his face. "Again! There it is again. just like when I saw Garp saying he was going after you his guys! What is happening?"

Everyone traded glances between each other and Naruto. Kakashi and Nami themselves made straight for him, but one stopped part-way. "Naruto is right, he sniffed out our ruse and Garp punched out everybody," kakashi confirmed. Sasuke and Sakura both went on high alert, while the fighters among them twitched at the news. Kakashi himself cast all his senses out, exchange his comfy attitude for a mission mindset: decisive and lethal.

"Sensei!" Naruto called over, pleading with him. "Inside my head, a picture just popped in. The same thing happened before right after Usopp got taken. Why does this happen, and now I know my shadow clones were destroyed?"

'Hmmmm,' Kakashi noted inside his head. 'Does he even know of how shadow clones can transfer memories at all? Anyone who got the jutsu right from the forbidden scroll would have that component right in front of them. Still... now that I know more about him back in the village...' **[1]**

"You mean Grandpa is following me again!?" Luffy panicked, running back and forth, gripping his hat with both hands to pull down over his head, and glancing left, right, or up in terror.

"Naruto," Kakashi spoke up. "The same things happened to me, too. because of our Shadow clones. Listen," Kakashi stepped forwards, revising the content before him to simplify it. "When shadow clones dispel they can-"

"Monkey D. Luffy." Throughout the town, a wide, loud message cut-off Kakashi's explanations.

"Your formal invitation to the execution of Usopp, the scion of a filthy pirate criminal Yassop, shall henceforth be delivered. For crimes of piracy, deception and beguile, alongside raising a pirate flag and associating with terrible scoundrels, the imbecile is to face beheading inside of one hour. Held at the precise execution block which the heinous outlaw Gold Roger met oblivion upon."

The street was quiet again, given over to the piter-pater of rain slowly building in volume. Some left the pirates damp, yet none of the rainfall touched one of them; instead, it was sizzling under the heat of Monkey D. Luffy's anger.

"Usopp! We're going for him and getting away from here, and fast!" Luffy declared, slamming one fist into his palm, impatient to hit somebody. Looking up between all his nakama, they each met him with the same determination: Sasuke found his hand ready on Kazoku Shugo, Zoro, Sanji and Gin each were ready for a fight, Sakura swallowed but stepped up beside Nami and Naruto, as Luffy's gaze settled on Kakashi.

"Old man. I can shoot forwards to that stand and grab Usopp. But Booger and Alvida might be there too, and anyone they have with them. Grandpa might show up and snatch away all of us. What can we do? Owww... rrrrr" Staggering the rubber man leaned against the wall with one hand on his head, mumbling. "All this thinking makes my head hurt."

"It's not only Usopp, though," Nami cut in, looking around them. "A massive storm is building. One that'll break at any moment, and

sailing out of here will be impossible We have to get to the ship and be ready to leave the second we have Usopp and everyone aboard."

"Alright." Kakashi's command struck each of them like lightning: fast, powerful and left them in awe. "Unlike Naruto, I cannot make shadow clones endlessly, and Garp might still be out around here. Nami you are with me; we'll move to the Going Merry and prepare to sail off. Sanji or Gin will need to fight Buggy to bludgeon him out of the fight, but only jutsu can incapacitate Alvida. Captain, you and my Genin will focus on Usopp. You have defeated this Captain Kuro before. Can you do it again?"

Luffy answered by reaching for his hat, planting it on Nami's head, again. "Look after this for me, Nami. If I have to, I'll smash every part of Kuro to pieces. I used to think he was just uncool, but now I'm gonna break him worse than I did to Arlong."

"Hold your horse's captain," Sanji cut into the tirade, drawing attention from everyone. "They already misled us once, and we've got THE Vice-Admiral Garp to worry about, too. Let's plan a moment before rushing over and marching into another trap."

"Too long. Let's plan on the way," Luffy declared. "Saving Usopp comes first!" Luffy declared. Banter ensued, with Zoro, Gin, Sanji and Nami losing to Luffy's persistence. All as Kakashi began to think back over the wider scope: 'This Kuro sounds like an ambush specialist, and he'll have the clown and that woman, Alvida, beside him. Every power has a weakness, just like a jutsu, and perhaps her powers are unable to let everything slide. We need to keep a way open for a quick escape-'

"Ahhhh, no! The Merry!" Naruto's shout rang through the alley, both hands on his head again, the boy trembled frantically. "The lion and Mr. Unicycle. I got another brain picture of them at the Merry. They beat up my clones and now want to sink it so we get trapped here!"

One weird thing happened after another. The next moment, Kakashi snagged Naruto and threw him over one shoulder, next both hands

were flying. "Suiton: Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu." In seconds, puddles and rainwater all mixed together into an extra Kakashi, which pulled Nami onto its back. "Nami? Naruto? You both hang on to me! We'll secure the ship, then leave another batch of clones behind and reinforce the others. Everyone else, make for the plaza and get Usopp out alive, then regroup!" That was all he whispered before the quartet vanished.

Immediately, those still behind were flying fast enough to leave Nami and Naruto unable to see nought but blurs around them. Kakashi was moving at full speed, and still thinking: 'I have to make this quick. Sanji and Zoro are strong too, and I'm sure Sanji will set chivalry aside with a comrade's life on the line.

"Ugghh! How in all the world can you not be bothered by all this rain, Alvida?" Grumpily, Buggy spat a glob of make-up drizzling down his face, his entire get-up ruined by the rain.

"You do know everything can slide right off from me with the Smooth-smooth power?" Alvida answered, coyly. "Back in my days without it, such rain would demand I cover up this beautiful form." Dragging one hand across her profile, the woman fed her vanity to pass the time.

Far up on the scaffold, Usopp was all alone. The rain soothed his leg somewhat while his spirit sank deeper into certain thoughts. 'Look at me. Look at where I am. Kidnapped, tied up, and about to die. I don't wanna die. Maybe I shouldn't have left Syrup Village at all. Making-up stories about adventures and being a pirate was so safe and easy. I mean, sure I gave a great effort.' As the last thought came through his mind, the image of Kuro's ambush played out a painful recall. 'I got a lot of shots in. Only after losing a hundred men does anyone capture the great Captain Usopp!' Another image of the truth spat from his memories, mixing with Nezumi shooting him down with absolute ease. 'And I still got some great times with my crewmates. All of us are strong and powerful. They're definitely coming here for me. After all, I'm the reason we even got a ship.' Now the lies really

came: the picture of the Going Merry sailing out from Loguetown started poisoning his mind.

'No. That's not true. I'm strong, wise, and an essential part of our crew. Okay, maybe I'm lying a bit too far. I... I didn't do anything in Nami's village. I'm not strong or powerful or tough like the others are; heck Sakura's gotta be more useful than me. But...'

'But they have to come for me. They have to. They have to...'

Swallowing hard at a lump of iron in his throat, Usopp tasted salt on his damp cheek. "Please! My friends! Rescue me!" He pleaded to the heavens.

"Of course, we are!" Across the plaza, an answer came through the storm, drawing attention from everyone. There, right there, out from a road between the buildings, Usopp's friends arrived!

Monkey D. Luffy was at the head, bent down and barrelling forwards: an angry, red-eyed rhino! Zoro and Gin were a short space behind him, shaping their charge into a wedge, with Sanji, Sakura and Sasuke in the centre. The firstmate and "Man-Demon" had their weapons ready, yet the ninjas didn't.

"Oh, so you finally got the memo. Did you Straw-hat!" Buggy gloated with a smirk. "Just in time to flashily watch your dear friend die!" Beside him, Alvida grinned and threw her cloak aside. The clown drew his knives out, while she raised her club and all their crew braced for the fight.

Still running, Luffy was spinning both arms in circles, ready to unleash his barrage: "Booger the Clone! Ugly-Alvida! Gimme back my Nakama!" Immediately, Luffy stopped; the crewmates behind him almost collided with their captain. 'Damn it, I said pass a signal, Luffy,' Sanji cursed him. Gin and Zoro stopped short just level with Luffy and quickly shuffled backwards.

The Rubber man planted his feet and let loose: "Gum-gum: Gatling!" Shot after shot, punch after punch, the sight of every enemy became filled with Luffy's powerful fists. Cranking the output every higher, a tidal wave of impacts washed over the ranks of enemies before Luffy.

Sasuke already had both eyes out, let a low whistle out, impressed with a front-row seat to every detail of Luffy's assault. Even if somebody got around one punch, another nailed them only seconds later. Suddenly, the captain snapped both arms back in, loading up his right leg.

"Gum-gum: Whip!" The limb extended, covering half the plaza and scything down their stunned foes. A call went out and more goons came out from doorways, alleys and more, running straight for the scaffold. Sasuke and Sakura made their own moves: shuriken were flying at anyone outside Luffy's range or the few who'd managed to dodge his whip. Hidden by the dark clouds and with targets resembling packed sardines, none of the enemies saw anything until cuts and blood raked through their lines. Sasuke kept one eye on the scaffold all the while, ready to hit anyone that popped out.

"Hh. Nice throws, Genin!" Zoro's complement sneaked in, just as Sanji gave a command. "Second wave, go!"

At the cook's words, Zoro and Gin resumed their charge with each man's student at their side. "Zoro! Sasuke! Cut Ugly-Alvida!" Luffy hollered. "Gin and Sakura, go knock Boogie in the nose!"

"AHHHH-You bastard!" Buggy struck a pose with all his knives out and made straight for Luffy, keeping his lower half attached this time. Gin and Sakura interposed themselves between both captains, while Sanji ran up after Zoro and Sasuke.

"No you idiots! Nobody gets to hit the lady!" Glancing back, Sakura watched him ready to kick Zoro's head.

"CHAAAA! Sanji, this is not a place for chivalry," the girl shouted aloud. The pinkette was pulling her long hair out watching the

charging cook. Her warning carried to the swordsman in time for him to duck. The hopeless Romeo sailed over to meet one of the few bozos to survive Luffy's salvo.

"Come on, Alvida-pirates! Charge out!" At Buggy's signal, further pirates leapt out from windows and fake crates stacked along the walls, charging straight for the extended Straw-Hat crew. Zoro glared over at them, then snatched Sanji by his hair. "Look, swirly-brow. It's hit that girl or let Usopp die, and if you choose the latter, I'll gut you right here, today. Go fight their back up with Luffy!"

"No way, moss-head!" Sanji bit back. "I can't stand for-"

"Sanji, come on!" A familiar hand, with an extendable arm, seized the chef by his shoulder. The first mate and the cook followed it to Luffy's wild grin; driving a very, very sinking feeling in Sanji's stomach.

"Hm," Zoro smirked, "Try not to die, lover-boy," then he let go. With only a yelp, Sanji went flying straight for Luffy, but the rubber man wasn't letting go. "Go kick 'em all down!" Luffy planted his foot down, braced Sanji over one shoulder, and grinned. "Gum-gum: Borrowed Black-foot Twister!" Luffy went spinning, with his arms out and swinging Sanji like a club. The cook's failing legs struck anyone he met, while the poor cook's cries echoed along his trajectory as Luffy stumbled around diagonally, growing dizzier and dizzier the longer he spun.

Zoro resumed charging right for the slippery foe so close to his student, with a dangerous grin growing on his face at the sounds of battle and Sanji's poor fate. Eventually, after Luffy knocked down nearly a dozen more mooks, he stopped himself and threw his cook like a bowling ball!

"OW!-Ah-CAP-TAIN!" The cook slammed into another four rouges, then all five met a wall hard enough to crash right through it. Luffy stumbled around before shaking his head. Looking away from his own crewmate-turned-cannon-ball, the captain spied the scaffold

before him "I'm coming, Usopp! I'll die before one of them hurt any of you! I promise!"

"GGGrrrr! What the hell about me, Luffy!?" a certain nakama called over from the crater left from his impact.

"Shishishishi. Sorry Sanji!"

Elsewhere at the Harbour-front, fresh waves cut across the ocean's surface; the vanguard to the larger storm. Nami held on tight to her ride, while the water-clone of Kakashi kept flying from one roof-top to the next.

In no time, the squad arrived at the Going Merry. Naruto catapulted over his sensei's shoulders, eager to get stuck in a fight. "Alright, time to be awesome! You steal my home, I'll beat you down no matter where you are! Come on out and... Huh?"

Right before the four of them... there was nobody to fight.

Cabaji, Mohji and a familiar large lion were sprawled over the floor; not moving but not dead either. All three were wounded, and they were not alone. "Huh? The Marines! They came here, too?"

Everyone was aboard now. Nami and Naruto each shouted the same words in unison with each other. Kakashi strode past the siblings and up the gangplank, looking around.

"Perhaps they knew this was our ship, or witnessed these rouges and charged up here to arrest them?" the JOnin proposed. "I count 20 of the Marines total, and there was a fight here, since both sides have injuries. But none of them are dead."

"Thirty." From aboard the Going Merry, one deep, serious call met the Straw Hats. Both Kakashi's vanished while Naruto leapt for the haul, planting his feet on this and ran straight up, with Nami scrambling up behind them. Together, they all found one man standing by the mast: a looming figure clad in in-green robes, his

face obscured with a hood, a fresh and unwelcome mystery. Naruto was ready for his favourite ninjutsu, both Kakashi's drew their kunai and Nami stayed behind them, glaring.

"Who are you? Are you trying and steal our ship? Are you with Buggy, Kuro and that woman, Alvida too?" the girl demanded.

"Get off of my home," Naruto exclaimed. "Are you looking for a fight? Do you have more buddies here, too? Well I'll beat you all up, believe it!" Naruto dropped his stance and spun around scanning all around the ship.

Kakashi buried a seething response, 'Turning your back on an obvious threat. That will get you killed, Naruto.'

"I am no enemy to you four," the stranger replied. "Were that different, I wouldn't have come to remove the Marines from stealing this boat." Walking up towards them, the cloak this person wore rippled with the wind at his back; obscuring the being's profile, yet not his staggering height.

Looming in the growing darkness, neither Kakashi nor Nami spoke up. The Jonin felt familiar instincts buzz down his spine, reflexes driving one hand up to uncover his special eye. 'This person. They're powerful,' he almost breathed aloud.

"Well, then we have you to thank," Kakashi addressed their visitor."

The figure drew back his hood: uncovering wild hair in a widow's peak and a wide tattoo spanning half his face. He was an older man, yet....a potent gaze left Naruto and Nami to edge backwards. 'Why do I feel like I'm standing next to Shimura Danzo?' Kakashi pondered, quietly.

"Sometimes," the stranger spoke up. "Fate will deliver just what you need when you are least aware of it,. Your enemies lie elsewhere, and came here precisely after the one named 'Kuro' spread his voice across this town. Preparing to leave would be a wise decision here,"

the stranger advised. "Though I ask you to let me stay behind in Loguetown."

Naruto glanced over at his teacher, while Nami looked to the heavens. 'Huh?' 'The storm. That's strange.' Squinting upwards with her, Kakashi did not take his eyes over their visitor as he made a decision.

"Hey, sensei," Naruto called. "If the Merry is safe now. Maybe one of us can go back and help everybody."

"That may not be necessary," the man who'd saved their ship spoke. "Do you not have faith in your captain and those he chose to rescue their ally?" At the stranger's question, Naruto glared over at him. "What do you know? Who are you anyway? Coming here on our boat, saving it but not saying who you are, and saying I don't think Luffy can do it? Come on, why not you and I go right here right now?" Naruto was almost spitting, ready for a fight until Nami ran forward and locked on hand on his shoulder.

"No, little brother. Mr.," she addressed their company. "If you came to help us, thank you. There might be more Marines coming, so let's prepare to cast off. Naruto, help me loosen the sails, but don't raise the anchor yet." The pair moved off with one Kakashi following them. The other stayed behind with their guest.

"You haven't given us your name, still. And that often is a warning sign." At Kakashi's proposal, their new acquaintance smiled over to him.

"Some speak of me as a Dragon. And I will share my past if you do the same." Silence ensued, with Kakashi lazing about a smidge; easy and ready to end this man life, or try to. "Well then, Dragon-san, thank you. Let's lend the other two some help."

Standing there, Kakashi waited until their guest took a step, then followed to keep him in sight. He proved to be a handy ship-hand, as inside of minutes everything was nearly ready. Until: "Fool, all to this

end!" Kuro's voice rang across the town once more. The younger company looked up, fearful, while their guest and Kakashi only shifted their eyes.

"Caught again, you unclothed buffoon! Monkey D. Luffy and Usopp, with the pair of you here in my grasp your shared execution will commence immediately!"

"Captain Luffy!" "No!" The boy exclaimed while the girl gasped, both dropping their tasks to leap off the ship and run straight towards the plaza. Throwing caution to the wind they took a main road and were sprinting: Naruto shooting ahead of Nami from Sanji's leg exercises, while she kept up from half a lifetime spent running.

Rising up, Kakashi followed them before glancing to his remaining company. The man had not moved, only looking on ahead; had his sharingan not been out Kakashi would miss a certain twitch in his lips and a fresh shade in his eyes.

'So, Luffy is the reason you are lending us a hand. But after his Grandpa.....oh boy!' Realization dawning on him, Kakashi had two options before him, and seized the more pressing one.

"You have nothing to worry for, here." Dragon answered. "Go after those you value and save them, I will remain here with your ship." At his company's command, Kakashi swallowed back a request and launched himself over the side.

Minutes beforehand, the Straw Hats were buckling. Usopp watched from his isolated spot, folding his lips together and trying to stifle his tears. "GGHkkk... Luffy. You came for me."

Down below, right after Luffy let go of Sanji, Sasuke tried to slash at Aliva and met a dangerous surprise. Sliding straight towards him with her club raised, Sasuke had Kazoku Shugo drawn and ready; thrusting the tip through her gut, the Genin hissed and bent right.

His strike was sliding right off Alvida, so Sasuke bent his legs and spun, pivoting to a stop as Zoro took his turn: "Sentoryu: Oni Giri!" Like teacher like student, the sharp blades of both would touch and slide, unable to cut. Alvida herself slid her body over Zoro but seized his shirt's collar with one hand, throwing that man head-over-heels back where he'd come from.

'Damn, how'd she slip right off like that?' Spinning himself over, Zoro's foot met the rain-soaked ground and slid. Precariously, the man found his balance in a split second and did not fall. Four thugs jumped him from behind, to meet a flurry of shuriken. "Thanks Sasuke. Did you catch what happened?"

"Yes," The Uchiha replied, now only one meter from his teacher with both eyes following Alvida sliding about for another pass. "My sharingan caught how the swords would slip, but I wasn't fast enough to pull out. If our idea about swords were wrong, how can we beat her?"

"You think that fire-move might work in this rain?" Zoro raised his guard with the question, their enemy almost ready while Sasuke curled his brow. "Draw her head-on, maybe my ninja wire can work."

Nodding, Zoro advanced with both blades raised. Their foe was sliding-around, building momentum under the rainfall across a wider arc. Zoro almost kept advancing before another lesson came to his ears: *"You don't always need to advance on somebody else," Kakashi told him that morning, sparring with the Saw-blade. "I knew you would slash for my head and waited for it come. Now, I do have the heavier weapon, so try letting me come in and waste that strength, then counter me. "*

Finding his balance, Zoro traced his enemy carefully. Testing his patience, the swordsman waited while Sasuke worked. Once Alvida was within 9 metres and raising her club, shuriken flew out to greet her.

"Hmmm, silly boys," she cooed towards them. "Your ugly, tiny toys don't hurt me." None of the shuriken hurt Avlida, and neither were they aimed at her.

"Sentoryu: Tora Gari!" two blades slashing down, and the third cut horizontally behind them: the woman smirked until the blade rang into her club. Both weapons rattled, Zoro pressing in, his attack becoming a parry until the club spun out of reach and into the air. Shifting away, and swordsman smiled while Sasuke pulled tight, his wires enclosing their foe.

"Damn, it slipped out from my oh so smooth hands. If only someone would fetch it to save me," Alvida bemoaned.

"Right away boss!" Trapped, Sasuke wound-up scrambling from a stampede of love-struck idiots, as Zoro turned away to mow through them. Ducking away, unwilling to give up his trap, the Uchiha nearly missed half his wiring falling slack. Alvida managed to slide out from most and get one bare leg free. "Oh, so easy it is to stride out from such barbaric bondage. Now, prepare for a ride, you naughty boy."

In no time, Sasuke went air-born; practically water-skiing behind the rapid slip-and-side that was Iron-mace Avlida. All until a wall came close and he smirked. Gripping it with chakra on both feet, Alvida stop with a jolt and fell over.

Across the plaza, Gin and Buggy met each-other head-on as Luffy was staring up at his nakama. "Of course I came for you Usopp. I would come for any of you. Hold on, I'm on my way!"

"No you flashily don't-"

"Not in yer life, clown." Some hidden reflex saved Buggy from a hard blow right over his head. Twisting, the pirate-clown had Gin in his sights, and struck a pose. "Oh. You want a piece of me first, do ya? Well no matter what-HEY!"

Ahead of Sakura, close by, Buggy's lower half made a leap to its left and started catching up to its partner. Turning, the kunoichi found the clown glaring at her before he came right for her, hard. "Why is everybody still making right for my man parts! I have to pay you back for earlier, you cross-dressing freak of nature!"

"Huh? Cross-dressing? I'm a girl!" the pinkette cried back, fumbling a bit with her tonfa.

"Don't lie to me," Buggy spat back. "How can any female be that flat? And your forehead is a picture of ugliness."

Stillness....silence....Sakura did not make a sound. Buggy was mere meters away when one gesture came from his prey. "Huh? What's with that look?" Sakura's head was turning, somehow resembling an automaton on death-mode. Shooting off in a run, Gin got to watch his student snatch both tonfas, spinning them about enough to impress her teacher. "Huh? AH didn' teach 'er that. Did Ah?" The kunoichi was sprinting for Buggy, the man unconcerned, all until she covered meters in less than seconds! With precision and skill, Sakura put on a burst of speed, gripping the street with her chakra. And just before Buggy could move, she sent a burst into her legs and arms, leaping close enough to whack the man right in his face!

Buggy got sent spinning, even Gin too surprised to hit as he sailed by, close enough to give a bloody smile with some missing teeth. Watching from his spot, it was a front-row seat to a monster pursuing Buggy with blazing pink fury. "Ugly! My forehead!" Sakura exclaimed. "What did you say!" Once she got up close again, Sakura landed two more ringing blows until her prey dissembled himself.

"Ow! M' theeth! You made me looossh some theeth, freak!"

Holding his mouth with one hand, Buggy found his target again, pulling something from her tool pouch.

"Die, little girl!" From the left, a regular pirate leapt with his blade raised high. Caught, Sakura could only look up, finding the sword

coming to split her head in half. All until a guardian sailed up from the opposite way and kick him. "Nobody's hurts her on my watch!"

Sanji landed with grace as Gin caught up. "Sakura, keep yer head up. Gettin' mad like that'll leave yah dead." Scolded, the girl glanced around, finding the trio surrounded by a ring of enemies.

"Gyahahahahahahaha! Got ya right where we want cha!" Up above, Buggy was circling, waving both arms towards the rooftops. "And now, you all are about to flashily be blown to pieces! Cannon crews, get out here!" Looking about, Sanji and Gin both hissed towards small canons angled straight at them.

"I count six of them out from the windows, and there might be more. We have to-"

"Fool, all to this end!" Sailing over the battlefield, a magnified voice reached everyone to pause their struggles.

"Caught again, you unclothed buffoon of a pirate! Monkey D. Luffy and Usopp, with the pair of you here in my grasp your shared execution commences now!"

Paralyzed for one moment, the Straw Hat pirates each turned right for the tower, where the missing enemy captain stood but Luffy wasn't anywhere to be seen.

"What? Wh-Where did Captain Luffy go off to?" Sakura. "Damn it!" "They fooled us!" Sasuke and Zoro spoke nearly in tandem, Alvida slipped out from her ensnarement and Zoro pistol-whipped once, twice, three times. Falling, three more enemy pirates went for the kill, as Buggy raised one hand for his canons!

"Fire-style: Great Fireball jutsu!" Zoro was glaring, defiant as death drew near, all until one fireball struck his would-be killers. The first mate fell clear, losing some hair off his arms while the targets were cooked; and Sakura made her own move.

"Clone-jutsu!" in a flash, several dozen copies of one pinkette emerged in a ring surrounding herself, her teacher and her protector.

"Huh? Whaa-who are my Buggy-balls supposed to shoot at now?" Buggy complained up above. "Only the orange one was supposed to copy himself." Glancing left and right, indecision was broken by a hand snagging him by the shoulder....from the sky!

"Stop hurting my crew!" Cutting over the battlefield, a fresh and powerful voice came from the sky even higher than the clown. Following it, every set of eyes found the barest traces of one silhouette high above the buildings; linked to a single extended arm grasping the clown by his shoulder. "Hi guys! I'm up here!"

"What th' hell got ya that high, Don Luffy!" Gin shouted, incredulous at the predicament.

"I wanted to hit someone on the roof," Luffy called back. But they moved and I went a bit too high."

"Grrr. Of all the times to overdo-it, this one is the worst, you idiot!" Zoro called him, his arm and chest now stained with blood yet still fighting off six men at once. Luffy ignored him, the hapless captain falling with a spin. Throwing out one more arm, the limb came to the concrete just beside Kuro's head and both men locked eyes together. "Gum-gum: Spinning-sling shot!"

"Huh-AAAAAAHHHHHH!" Buggy felt his line reel in, throwing the Chop-chop-man into an uncontrolled spiral beside a certain Monkey D. pirate.

"You daft trash, violating my plan," Kuro's snarl was heard by Usopp, all until a flying thug nailed the Pussy-foot captain dead-on, throwing him off his pedestal. Looking back down, the sniper found Sanji and Gin thrashing most of the thugs around them, while the spare Sakura's drew their attention. None of the pink copies gave any damage, yet by taunting or running from them, each enemy was open for a kick or four tonfa's battering one after another.

Elsewhere, Luffy let Buggy lose. The clown went flying out with a screech until he met the street in a fresh eruption of dust and damp concrete.. Still, the captain didn't stop, spinning around and letting his other arm go... and landed straight beside Usopp. "Huh? Luffy? Uh-w-w-w-what is-"

"Let's get going," leaning over, Luffy seized the ropes binding his crewmate and pulled. Under his strength, the wood boards they were tied into came free, removing the pressure that was keeping the sniper on his knees. All as a shadow was moving.

. "Hh, see, I told you I'd get here," Luffy was grinning now. "Now let go!"

Nearly 3-dozen cuts came across Luffy! Stopping under the sensation, a similar force knocked the captain to his knees then threw a stockade down, trapping Luffy inside.

"Fools," came in a spat of disgust.

"Luffy!" "What?" "Damn!" "Don Luffy!"

While their crewmates shouted in the plaza below, Usopp's bewilderment was silenced.

Four different blades were right against the sniper's nose, eyes and throat. "Caught again, you unclothed buffoon!" Kuro was back, standing tall with his back to the battle and his trademark cat's-claws resting near the necks of his fresh prisoners. Luffy tried pressing against his confines. After failing to escape, he twisted his head to look up at their captor.

"Kuro." Lightning flashed above, highlighting the posh clothing and cracked spectacles. Soaking and spindly, the image was topped by the face of a madman, his eyes wild and bloodshot against a granite face.

"My plan has been violated by your actions far too intolerably, Monkey D. Luffy. Throwing that circus fool or winding up in the skies were not your roll; even my vengeance has been soiled by you, now."

"Captain!" "Luffy!" Sasuke and Sakura were running for the platform, dodging any thug in their way, Kakashi's training paying dividends. All until a new force came from the side, sliding down to swipe both aside with their mace! Caught from behind, the pair sailed out, skidding over the ground to a stop near the tower.

. "Ah, ah, ah, naught boy." A whisper came, and Sasuke bent around; a familiar iron club grazing his face. Blood went flying.

"Sakura!" "Kid!" Kuro barely looked over as Sanji and Zoro erupted. Luffy took all of this in, struggling with all he could muster against the stockade. Usopp felt the tickle of one blade edge ever so deeper into his neck. It's owner straight out from a nightmare.

"I should not feel this," the victorious man seethed, aloud. "Wealth. Obscurity. All would be mine from Miss. Kaya. My scheme held no flaws, no factor unassessed. It was perfection incarnate! I should not be held with rage nor thrill as those which you have invoked in me!"

Kuro was grinning now. "Your deaths, and all those here shall destroy that! My plan will succeed, victory has been grasped by me, and now the massacre begins." Slowly, deliberately, the man raised his clawed blades overhead. They hung right over Monkey D. Luffy, while the pirate spun his eyes over towards Usopp. "No!" His legs still free, Luffy lashed out with the extremity. Usopp was hit right in his chest, sending him off the scaffolding to land right on top of the Genin.

His crewmate away, Luffy look over the plaza, "Zoro! Sanji! Gin! Get the Genin and Usopp out of here! The three of you, rescue our friends! That's my last order to you. And I'm the Captain!"

"Captain Luffy!" Back where he'd led their charge, Luffy found Naruto sliding to stop. Nami right behind him, both calling his name together.

Watching all around, Monkey D. Luffy met the eyes of assembled his crew before the thunderous heavens: Sanji and Gin were running for the scaffold, Zoro was occupied by some 15 men, as Sakura and Sasuke were shaking their heads with Usopp beside them. Nami and Naruto were side-by-side, each of them looking towards their captain.

"Speak your final words, Monkey D. Luffy," Kuro proclaimed. "Share your regrets, your failures. Death hangs above your neck."

"LUFFY NOOOOOOOOOO!" a building nearby exploded in a cloud of dust and debris; shattered by a single man barrelling forth to a stop. Monkey D. Garp was looking straight at the platform, letting Grandson and Grandfather meet one another's gaze.

"Captain!" above the thunder-laced about the clouds, echoes of 1,000 chirping voices filled the air; Following a glowing, cracking ring of light, Kakashi had arrived and was set to move.

Still looking at his Grandpa, Luffy filled his lungs. "OLD MAN! HELP EVERY GET FREE AND LIVE THEIR DREAMS! MY NAKAMA ARE FREE, SO I'M FINE! I SWEAR. I AM THE MAN WHO WILL BECOME....THE KING OF THE PIRATES!"

In every home, every cranny, even all the pirates down below paused in that moment.

Garp and his own Marines heard the precise same words, the giant of the man shaking his head. "NO WAY! LUFFY, DON'T YOU DARE DIE ON ME! I'M COMMUN!" The Vice-Admiral was moving, and so was Kakashi, silently. Yet still too far away as Kuro pulled his blades down.

Luffy was ready to die. Before them all. Before Team 7: Sakura covered her mouth; the Uchiha's face was gaunt; Naruto lost his

sense of himself, and Kakashi watched a nightmare come to life.

The moment stretched for eternity as Kuro's hand fell. The Jonin moving at full speed, his sharingan ready... Luffy raised his head: smiling to the world: "Sorry. I'm Dead."

Kakashi was stopped-short, all the onlookers swept-up in that moment. Light came. Blinding the entire audience, as a single roar exploded: "LUUUUFFFFFFYYYYYYYYYY!" Deeper than an earthquake, louder the thunder, a Marine reached the base of the execution stand too late!

Kuro's blades, his metal blades, crackled under the clouds above, laced with lightning.

With the speed bearing its name, a single lightning bolt struck the stand. Under the force of a bomb, metal fastenings melted with the shock, wooden beams fell, even the concrete base was weakened from grounding the world shook to everyone watching, ignoring the mystery of why none of them were hit either.

Watching the stand collapse, Sakura, Sasuke and Usopp realized they were about to be crushed.

"AH, run!" "No-uh, shadow-clone Jutsu!" Scrambling to their feet the trio were nearly crushed, until something displaced each beyond the drop-zone. A wall of Naruto's were running, watching two snatched away so a single clone went for the substitution. Crashing the ground, the call of the moment took the clone with it, while Gin and Sanji didn't dare to move, and Nami found herself holding two hands over her mouth and both eyes wide.

Steam encircled the scaffold, rainfall turning to vapour by the electric heat. There... standing... somebody took a glance left and right.

Gin dropped to his knees. Zoro barely held on to consciousness. Kakashi held Sakura and Sasuke from his quick-save, with Usopp beside them. The sniper couldn't speak, Kakashi and Sakura felt

their empty lungs burn, Sasuke's eyes were blinking, the ninja even tried a pulse to check for genjutsu.

"Captain Luffy. You're okay!" His face alit with glee, Uzumaki Naruto collided with very-much-alive Luffy. Under the slam to his middle, the rubber man threw back his head to laugh. "Shishishishishi! Guess I am. That's nice."

Under the storm above, even their enemies, pirate and marine alike, couldn't shake off the stupor of a miracle. Beyond the crowd, Nami had backed into a building, something reaching to her mind and heart, pulsing like a fresh burn. "Luffy... what... am I...?" pressing one hand over the mouth, the girl worked to bury what she felt as Zoro and Sanji started breathing again. Kakashi could only croak, Usopp and Sakura's legs failed them, leaving Sasuke to glance around the remaining battlefield as Gin found his voice first: "Don! We... you were gonna die right 'ere!"

"Yeah, I'm not dead." Luffy shot back, drawing in everyone's attention then raising his head to world, again. "And that means, I can still be the King of the Pirates with you, now!"

"NEVER!" "Hmm?-" a freight train collided with Luffy, driving him and Naruto flat on the ground. The former got his senses back first, held up by two powerful, familiar hands. The face of a definitely crying, unquestionably distraught, impossibly angry Monkey D. Garp filled Luffy's vision. "What are you doing?" the man demanded. "You almost die right there. Do you think I could face your father after something like that? You had me more worried than ever before in my life boy! BWAAAAAAAAAAAA!" The onlookers watched as Garp yanked his grandson into his chest, swinging left and right, his bearded head careening backwards to the sky. Some of them heard things like "Ace," "won't forgive," "another loss," and more. All until the Naruto clones broke the spell: "Nami-nee! Watch out!"

Following where they looked, Nami barely escaped a sideswipe from the last pirate captain standing.

"Boys! We need to get going," Alvida commanded. "Everyone grab the weak-ones, leave the others to the Marines!"

"Yes, ma'am!" What remained of the Kuro-Buggy-Alvida alliance rallied. The Marines were moving too, one taller officer under a fedora sending squads right for the rouges, while Kakashi rallied his own side together. Nami barely noticed, looking up from where she'd thrown herself to the ground, soaked with dirt and water from one puddle; all under the watch of a slippery, sexy enemy circling for a fresh pass.

But a gaggle of Naruto's got there first, forming a wall between the ladies as one stepped out from the line. "Hey, wait for boss." "I am the boss, the real Naruto," the stand-alone told his copies, having abandoned his captain for the one he cared for the most. Looking straight for the threat, Naruto's face curled. Endangering another person who showed him care, Alvida met the same face a certain Mizuki witnessed barely two months before.

"If anybody, tries and hurts my sister," Naruto declared, low and dangerous. "I'll kill them." He pulled four shuriken from his pouch, tossed them wide then both his hands were flying: "And here's my new jutsu, all the way from the Third Hokage! Ninja art: Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Three meters from Alvida, the four shuriken duplicated into four dozen. Neither side noticed the woman meeting the sharp swarm with a smirk., expecting them to just slide off her.

Kakashi had gathered the crew, passing on a fresh plan while untying Usopp. "We need to leave, now. The ship is safe, and the Marines can stay distracted by the other pirates. Sakura, Sasuke, I'm using Zabuza's favourite-jutsu to escape, after we get Luffy free."

"Uhhh, hey. Does anybody know why the Marines got here? And who's that guy choking Luffy with a hug?" Usopp's question found Kakashi's ear, updating the crew on the one person outside the know.

"That's his Grandpa, ask more questions later. But we might finally have the reason our captain has a few dozen screws loose," the cook replied.

"Hey guys!" Naruot cut in between them. "Let's go, I beat Alvida!" Another distraction yanked the crew's attention to a fresh surprise. Naruto stood over his foe: Alvide was sprawling on the ground, with tears and gashes all over her form, coloured with blood, and her pretty face under Naruto's foot. The Uzumaki was grinning, until something nailed him square in the face.

"You imbecile!" Sanji roar. "An unforgivable crime! I teach you just a few things and then you go and-" whatever Sanji would say next, it was silenced by one solid smack right over his cheek. Spinning, the cook almost fell until he met a furious, stressful and volatile Nami face-to-face.

"What' .THisisn',theMarinesarehere,Iwas-hhh-hhhhhh-that bitch tried to kill me, Sanji." Nami imparted to the cook. "But Naruto got in the way first." With a terrifying face, her voice near hysterical with a sliver of sense and still shaking Sanji senseless, nobody dared to interrupt Nami's tirade. Sasuke and Zoro had their mouths dangling open, looking between Naruto, a cut-up Alvida, and back to the crewmate again.

"AHHHH-G-G-G-G-G-GRap-Grip-Gar-GARP!" Buggy had come back, pulling everyone's attention to him. "WHEN DID YOU GET HERE!" The clone's blue hair formed a shapeless mane while he trembled 4 meters in the air, starring at the Grandfather and Grandson.

"Huh?" Pulling away from the Grandson still in his arms, Garp cocked his head to one side. "Who are ya? I'm having a moment with my Grandson. Did I punch you one time, somewhere?" Under the question, the pirate clown grew pale, and Garp cocked his head.

"Eh?... Hey! You're the bum who ran about on Roger's crew. Nobody else has a nose that stupid," pointing right for the captain with his

right arm, the left one still held tight to Luffy as the rubber-man tried to get free.

"Grandpa! I'm going to the Grand Line, and I wanna be the King of the Pirates! Lay off!"

"NEVER YOU INGRATE!"

"Hey, Vice-Admiral!"

"WHAAAAT?" Many of the Straw Hats felt Garp's eyes on them at Usopp's loud call-out. "That clown was working to kill Luffy," the sniper claimed. "The girl-pirate on the ground is on his side, too. Don't they deserve to get thrown in a brig?"

Silence hung in the air, until it got broken by a raving mad man. "Plan! My plan!" Right beside Buggy, what remained of Kuro swayed about on his feet. "It was perfection, and I will force it so!" Twitching with shock, Kuro's remaining arm was a mangled, scorching wreck. Every step he took the figure threatened to keel over.

"Monkey D... Monkey... D....my plan....die!" Breaking into a run, pouring in what little life he still had left, Kuro flung himself right for Luffy. Until one final force got in the way of the man's "perfect plan." Throwing the target aside, Kuro met a brick wall and fell flat on his back... silently, a behemoth gathered his knuckles together, cracking them with the building rumble that promised an avalanche.

"RRWWWHHHHHHAAAAAHHHHHH!" No words, only a roar. Monkey D. Garp seized what remained of Kuro with one hand, and Buggy with the other. Both were thrown together and power-slammed right into the street, so hard two dents broke apart to a depth of 10-meters. Garp wailed on both, his senses filled with pure wrath for those who'd worked so hard to kill the Grandson he loved.

A minute passed, sounds were surrounding Garp but nothing clicked in his mind, all until someone seized his wrist. Pausing, the Marine looked up, to find his sight was stolen.

"Ehh? Where'd this mist come from?" The entire plaza, so far as Garp and any of his men could see, was filled with mist so dense all could only hear the others calling around for their side. The clang of a sword and a gun shot pierced the calls, brokenly, while the Vice-Admiral looked about left and right.

"Wait... where's all the pirates go? Where'd Luffy go... LUFFY!"

"How long will that mist last, Kakashi?" Sanji questioned without breaking his stride. "Now I can see why you spent so long practicing to use it." Neck-in-neck with Kakashi, both were running at near-break-neck pace with the rest of the crew surrounding them and led by Luffy.

"Think later, Sanji," Luffy called over his shoulder. "Just run now, before Grandpa gets close to us again!"

"Luffy, that, that, that guy really is your grandfather?" Usopp questioned, shuffling forward with Zoro supporting him. "How can that work with you wanting to be a pirate?"

"It doesn't, and he wants to beat-up Luffy until he becomes a Marine," Nami answered, with Naruto right by her side.

"Uh-huh, we gotta get-"

"LUFFY! YOU AIN'T LEAVING ON MY WATCH, BOY!" Behind them, few of the group dared to look up as they heard another building somewhere crumble sideways to the ground. Another soon followed, growing louder and closer.

"Uh-oh." "Damn, doesn't that guy get the message?" "It looks like no quitin' run's in th' family," Gin snarkily cursed.

"How has he caught our trail this soon, even after Kakashi's mist?" Sasuke cursed, mirroring his shinobi-sensei's thoughts.

"That alley to the right! Turn and stop." 9 of the 10 nakama followed Kakashi's instructions, while Luffy had to skid his way to a stop before turning around and joining them.

"Old man, he's comin' and stopping never works good. We need to run," the terrified boy pleaded. While the others caught their breath, and Kakashi looked to Naruto.

"Naruto. Shadow-clones. Make 3 sets of crew, and maybe Garp with follow one set, while the rest of us make for the harbour." Nodding, Naruto executed the orders and soon 3 different groups of Straw Hats were out running again. Kakashi meanwhile looked around the others, ready for his choice.

"The Marines still have one warship in the bay, and those enemy pirates running around the city," he reasoned. "Get to the Merry, and cast off. If Garp gets closer he might detain all of us, kill Gin, and we won't find our home there. We need a rear-guard to occupy him," sliding his hand up to his face, Kakashi did not let any raise their own questions. "Garp is powerful, but from what I know, his rank implies to be near Jonin-class and he's certainly a strong man. This is not a fight we have to win, and the fewer who stay behind, the more evasive that distraction can be. I'll keep him off from us and stay behind, the rest of you make for the ship."

Some of the crew "N-No! Old man, nobody can-" With one seal, Kakashi silenced Luffy; hard as the wind, power and pressure came out from the man with a single hand sign. Each of the Genin felt their own complaints stop cold, as the rest felt shaken under a pressing rush of some mysterious power.

"I don't need to win," Kakashi replied, channelling pressure from the mark of confrontation his hand was in. His chakra kept swirling lightly around those assembled. "I'm not endangering any of you further. This isn't opening for a debate! Each of you, go!" The man before them was not the Kakashi they knew. Zoro himself felt it the strongest, the shift from a caring teacher or capable agent most had

come to know. Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke knew this side of their sensei the clearest: of the Sharingan Warrior.

"Luffy," Sanji barked. "Can your Grandfather run across the water, or does he need to swim over it?"

"I've never seen him swim," Luffy answered.

"We-grrhhh... Kakashi's the best we got," Zoro growled. "But the Genin don't have a hair-breath against somebody that strong, yet. Trust him, Captain, like we had trust with you against Arlong."

"No way!" Stomping one foot, Luffy held both arms set for the fight. "Danger coming to me is no problem, and together we're gonna face a lot. Grandpa is the strongest person I ever met, and I never beat him in a fight. Not once. Only all of us run, or I'm not moving. Not for my crew, not until I've done everything I can!"

"Alright," Kakashi nodded, throwing a fresh wave of fear across the other 8 people. Usopp, Sakura and Nami were shuffling towards the harbour as the fighters grimaced at the Jonin. "Watch for your Grandfather, in case he comes down on top of us."

His face a picture of fear, the pitch of his chattering teeth rising, Luffy did precisely what he was told; until his world fell to black and he met the ground face-first.

"Uh. Sensei, why'd you hit our captain on his head?" With Naruto's question, Kakashi took the rubber man over his shoulder and tossed the teen at Zoro. "Take him and run. I will rejoin you later." With a salute the Jonin vanished, leaving not a cloud behind under the rain. Both the pirates and the ninja's barely had seconds to think when-"LUUUFFFFFYYYYYY! YOU'RE COMIN' BACK WITH ME, BOY!"

"Alright, time to run." Zoro's words set everyone scrambling as Kakashi finished his prep. and held one hand over his head band. 'Now. Let's see what I can do with this Marine Vice-Admiral, and how much of a punch he can actually deliver.

End.

Until August, 2023, this chapter was mixed with Chapter 22, creating a whopper 22,500 word long chapter. As part of my August re-write, I chose to cut these in half to highly scenes and moments individually in both, Everybody meeting Garp, getting the low-down on Luffy's childhood, and everyone fighting off Buggy, Alvida and Kuro. While Kakashi vs. Garp deserves it's own spotlight.

[1]- I will not try to excuse or support any plot-holes, loose-ends or short-comings of Masashi Kishimoto or Eiichiro Oda. Fan-argues over the Shadow-clone memories are over a dime a dozen, and in all honesty people channelling such energy into debating one subject of a franchise shows how amazing the series and author are to spark passion that strong in their readers.

For this story, I am going to postulate that Naruto learned the jutsu directly from the Konoha Scroll of Sealed jutsu. Notes about the memory-transfer features would literally have been right in front of him. Kakashi, and practically 999 out of every 1000 ninjas, would logically assume anybody who read from that scroll would also pick-up the risks and benefits of the jutsu on the way, not ignore the details so completely. Yet, that kind of short-coming or gullibility does summarize Academy-student Naruto in a nutshell.

It's not an excuse to why he didn't pick-up on the trend, but it is one reasonable explanation for why Kakashi would assume Naruto did know about the memory-transfer in theory. Yet at the same time was inexcusably distant from his training pre-Shippuden and never realized it.

Garp vs Kakashi

Growth Through Chaos: Chapter 21: Haki and Chakra collide:

Monkey D. Garp vs. Hatake Kakashi

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

"Inner thoughts"= images or memories within somebody's head.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively.

Please, Read and Review. I really, really like Reviews.

The Straw hats were barrelling through the rain-swept street of Loguetown. Six turns and a mad dash later they could see the Merry rocking at the pier.

"Good, the storm is just about ready to break," Nami announced. "We have to get out of here now, or never." The ninjas leapt for the hull and each ran straight up while the remaining crew came behind them up a rocky gangplank. At once they were one deck, came a surprise.

"Eh? Who in the heck are you?" A cloaked figure was standing, right where Naruto and Nami had left him. Gin's question called the stranger's attention to them, and his face was certainly unnerving.

"Uh-uh-wh-what are you here for? G-g-g-g-get off, b-before I send my ten-thousand men on you. And if those don't work, I-I-I-I'll I'll pull out the dragons!" Usopp's stammering barely helped, going utterly unnoticed beneath the hood. "Who are you. What brought you to our ship?" Zoro challenged him.

"Oh, hey, hey, stop, there are no worries," Naruto spilt over the tension, turning his back to their 'guest' and holding both arms up before everyone. "He saved the Merry when we got here. Then he stayed since we had to save the captain. This guy's okay."

"Tell me," the looming wraith spoke. "You are the ones who follow this, Monkey D. Luffy? Even to so treacherous and unyielding a place as Grand Line?" Luffy was still knocked out, and once he was mentioned the crew closed ranks between him and the strange.

Nobody answered, at first. The silence coaxed another enquiry. "If you hold doubt in your hearts, this shall be your final chance to leave. Whatever goals you carry, pursuits that you chase, or debt you may hold for him. Fuelling yourself on that alone will not suffice. Every day you spend on his journey, every further league you sail, the dangers and obstacles will only grow worse than the ones before them. Why do you wish to join this voyage, if you cannot answer this question?"

"Shut up." Two men spoke at once: Gin and Zoro. "I've got no idea who you are, but those questions barely matter by this stage. None of our motivations really line up" the swordsman answered, "and everyone's here for their own reason. If anybody's weak, your question won't matter before too long, so why worry or it?"

"Don Luffy saved m'life, an' then some," Gin took over. "He's a captain worth following an' we know th' sorta dangers waiting in that... cursed sea. Ah already came from there half dead once, but Ah want t' go back t' conquer that fear. To aid my captain an' my crew whatever we find in those seas." Giving some members their backbone again, the next proclamation was the last person most thought would lend their share to the matter.

"It's not only for Luffy! Or only for us," Nami proclaimed, standing tall in the storm. Each of the crew and their guest turned their attention to her. "We're going for the Grand Line to live out everything we aspire to be. You know nothing about us, whoever you are," she accused him. "Luffy set us free, he gave us our lives again and a

way to live them, or our paths home are through those seas. We're not going just for him, and what gives you the place to ask any sort of question about us like that?"

"Hh. Well-spoken, Nami," Zoro found his own voice, gesturing to the idiot over his shoulder. "He wasn't willing to leave any of us, and everyone here might be dead or lost if we hadn't crashed into him, somewhere. But it's not only for him or ourselves that this is our journey."

Looking away from danger and straight for Sasuke, Zoro captured everyone's focus "I don't know who you are, but all of us aren't really usual pirates. Our captain is an idiot, and everyone does their own thing in their own way. We're not some iron-discipline crew, but different people doing different things with our own strength, and a bit lent to the others. We all have our own aspirations, but nobody is striving to meet them alone. Our captain places himself at risk for our sakes, we do the same and turn to others expecting the same from them. Have you ever met a crew like us before?"

The swordsman's conviction was infectious, shifting the mood so far even their visitor joined the others with a grin. Both arms came up, taking hold of his hood to unveil it. His full face, framed with a mane of wild black hair met the crew with a grin echoing in their memories. "No, and your answer bears a wonder and strength all its own. I have disabled the warship a certain vice Admiral arrived in. Should you escape now the Marines won't have the means to pursue you from here."

"Oh. Hey, thanks Mr. Tattoo. But we gotta wait for Kakashi..." His words dying on his lips, Naruto turned back towards the city, obscured behind a veil of rain.

"Little brother? He'll get back to us," Nami tried assuring him. "Right now we need to move the ship, away from here." Ignoring his sister, the Uzumaki kept staring, remembering, thinking... then called to his teammates.

"Sakura. Sasuke. You remember Sensei's bell-test? And what sensei said to us that day?" Ignoring further questions from their crew, the pair of Genin recalled it easily as spotlights came to the absent space where their guide, their anchor, their strongest link to the Leaf Village was held. The empty space of his presence invoked a fresh sense of indecision between all three. "With Zabuza, we didn't run. And at the end things were fine. The Merry is safe, and we can water-run just like he can," Naruto went further. "Breaking orders are kinda like breaking rules. Those who do break rules are scum."

"But those who abandon somebody," Sasuke took over, "are lower than scum. Let's go!" All three shinobi leapt back over the railing, Sakura half a second behind them. The trio were going back for their teacher, ignoring curses and calls from the others they left behind. "Naruto! No, little brother, come back here!" Nami screamed after them, as the trio dashed behind the buildings.

"Damn it, there's no way those kids are good enough to handle a Marine Vice-Admiral," Zoro spat out.

"Enough!" the force of a thunderclap silenced them. Turning around, everybody left felt the winds around them stirring up, while a hurricane of power was emerging over their visitor's face. "Your course lies ahead, not behind. I will go for them, and ensure you meet the four together. "

"Hey-hey-hey-hey-hey wait! Wait mister, thanks for this help and all, but who are you?" Stopping the looming figure at the gangplank, Usopp would've scurried had he been able to move. While looking past his shoulder, lightning streaked the sky beyond the stranger; casting him further in mystery.

"My name, you'll discover one-day yourselves, I'm sure. If your decisions are to follow him, building one another towards the goals you strive for, what reason could grant someone the power to stop that? Now go!"

Simultaneously as the four reinforcements departed, searching for the late-coming Kakashi, a particularly anxious Monkey D. Garp tore another building up to reach the basement. "Ah-uh, G-G-G-Grandpa!" Behind their scrambling Captain, nine fellow-Straw hats braced for a fight; most crossing their fingers as Garp came swinging. "Enough with these fakes. Tell me where my Grankid went."

As the jig was up, each of the assembly was struck with a fist and vanished. Each one that dissolved left the massive bulldog furious.

"Ahhgr. No. More. Fakes. Those ain't Luffy, so come'ere you-" Mid-shout, something struck his temple and Marine's sight went white.

Even tumbling head-over-heels, Garp caught the landing on his feet. Shaking his head to clear it, the man barely bothered lifting one massive hand to block a follow-up punch, then parried four tight, successive ones behind it. Striking the ground, the opponents met one another face-to-face: one a bearded, wild, immovable mountain, the other masked, focused and with two mismatching eyes.

"I don't wanna fight you. Luffy is my goal." The suited man turned away and ran up the road, around one corner then bashed through a solid wall, or, part-way through. "Huh? Who put that wall in my way!" With one hand and his head stuck inside, Garp reared back his other fist, then shattered the whole obstruction with a single hit. Next, the man noticed a series of dog faces shaped into the mud-bricks of that wall. Curious, but before he had a chance to ask, something snatched his ankle.

"Whaa!-Uh-urrr!" pulled right down under, Garp found himself submerged, with dust or dirt filling his eyes, nose and mouth. While his opponent came back above the ground and stared down at the tuft of hair left uncovered. 'Let's see how he escapes this. Nobody here has utilized chakra thus far,' Kakashi reasoned, 'and if he defeated Captain Luffy so frequently then Garp-san might have these Devil-fruit powers. The longer I delay him from reaching the water-front, the-'

A tremor shook the ground beneath him, as one hand burst out and seized a chunk of pavement. Immediately, it flexed and a certain grey-faced mug pulled itself back out, fixing its eyes on Kakashi "What is this! You put a wall in my way, then you pull me under? What kinda Devil-fruit did you munch on?"

"Well," the Jonin answered, shuffling back a few steps with each word. "It's past 8 at night, and I don't share secrets that late on this week of a month. Your Grandson is fine, and we will-"

"LUFFY NNNNOOOOOO!" Casually, terrifyingly, Garp burst his other arm free, planting both on the edge of his hole. "Quit blockin' me from Luffy! He'll head for the Grand Line as a pirate, next. That boy'll follow the other idiot when I'm twelve feet under first!" The rest of Garp erupted free from the hole. Next, he turned about to find Kakashi a mere 10 meters away: a sentinel beneath the narrow tunnel of a bridge.

"I'm afraid the sole way to reach your Grandson, will be after passing through me, Vice-Admiral. I have my own reasons for Luffy to remain a pirate and give the Marines some distance. The Captain has proven to me he is a true comrade. And he earned my friendship. He's already chosen a pirate's life, so the idea you have for him as a Marine appears long overdue for the trash bin."

A fresh roar answered him, with Garp right behind it barrelling for Kakashi. His target didn't bother moving; "I gotta punch you down to get to my grandkid? Okay!" Ready to flatten the cocky bastard, seconds from connecting with his fist Garp noticed sounds, smoke, flames and more erupting around the two men. The foundations of the bridge were shattered by explosions, as one outdoor patio table replaced Kakashi outside from the blast. Now behind his foe, the Sharingan-wielder eyed the cloud carefully; 'He likely won't die beneath that rubble. All the same-'

Dropping in a duck, Kakashi lost some hairs to another wreaking-ball arcing above him. Training saved him from Garp's attack, some instinct warning of the punch and pairing with his eye, he evaded

flying debris, then had to duck and weave between the barrage of fists that followed. Eight, fourteen, twenty-two, the numbers continued folding over themselves as Garp wailed into his target and Kakashi wove around each hit by inches. Until one came too fast and the Jonin tried to block. The impact sent him backwards through three different buildings, briefly knocking the breath from his lung.

Too fast for his mind to follow at first, waves of pain over Kakashi's back and arms rapidly fixed that. "Ackhhhhhh....eeeehhh" Shifting, the man found nothing broken but it barely eased the real impact left in his mind.

'That hit... does Guy strike that hard against real enemies? I don't remember him going that hard with me in sparring, but that's not a real fight. Did, can this impact alone outweigh Luffy's nature as a rubber man and injure him?'

Then Kakashi grasped that another punch hadn't come; he was alone.

Kakashi was no coward, and after pulling himself free the former ANBU took a whiff of the air. 'This rain is obscuring it, but his scent is heading right for the warf!'

Lightning lit up the skies, while thick waves collided together on the water almost driving the Going Merry off-course.

"Tie down the yard arm, and watch the knots," Nami cried. "If anything blows loose we'll risk colliding with the rocks! Gin, hold the steering steady." More of the navigator's commands rang over the deck, guiding the ship towards the open seas was a tricky challenge.

"Nami, we ain't too far the ninjas might get left behind, ain't we?"

"Never. I'm not leaving my brother behind, ever," Nami bit back with a screech.

"I can still see the warf," Usopp answered his crewmates, pulling in one of the lines with Sanji behind him. "Let's hope they hurry and get here, quick. I didn't get to eat anything and am feeling hungry."

"Hungry....food?... huh?" Luffy was stirring beside them.

"Oh, crap! Usopp." Zoro cursed as he watched a particular, unconscious captain pull himself up to his feet then look around.

"Oh. We're on the ship. That's nice. Sanji, can we have some meat?" The crew paused, watching for a moment as Luffy looked between all of them.

"Luffy," Nami called at him. "We're making preparations to sail out of here a bit, can you ensure everything is set away in the Lounge?"

"Okay. I'm going to get something, then we can leave and make for the Grand Line and-WAAHH!"

One step inside the doorway and something lopped around the Monkey D.'s heel, pulling him upside down in a trap.

"Huh? Ah thought Kakashi got rid'a that?" At Gin's question, Luffy became a frozen statue. Nami did the same, while Zoro let go of his line and barrelled for the lounge.

"Old Man! He hit me," Luffy recalled, "and where is he? I don't see him-wait, Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke. Nami, where are they all!" Twisting left and right, Luffy's panicking broke when he threw an arm for the doorway; stopping Zoro with a hit to his face, the arm grabbed the railing. Pulling himself for the port side, a chunk of the roof ripped out with the noose around Luffy's ankle.

"Luffy! Kakashi did stay behind to handle your Grandfather, but the others went back too before we could stop them. And I'm making sure we don't leave the bay without them too."

"No, Nami, Grandpa will kill them and-"

"LUFFY! All the passengers aboard the Merry, even Zoro with a bruise on his nose, froze. GET BACK HERE NOW OR-" they looked back to the port, to find Garp standing right on the warf staring straight at them.

The man was seconds from diving in and swimming for the ship, but-

"Fire-style: Great Fire-Ball jutsu!" Too tied up in tunnel vision, Garp barely clicked into the wave of heat growing on his left arm. With a leap, the massive man cleared the fresh fireball that struck the place where he'd stood. "Naruto, he's above us!"

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!" All at once, nine different voices called in unison. Finding the Marine air-born from one massive leap, each clone threw one star and executed the same technique. A vortex of sharpened stars took form; slicing through raindrops as they flew straight for the Vice-Admiral. From the ground, Naruto and Sasuke grinned at their teamwork, with Sakura hanging back for the next move. Up above them, Garp gathered both his hands, forming a hammer fist while gravity took hold. Ignoring all the sharp stars that bounced from his skin, the falling man reared his hammer back.

"Meteor-Dead Slam!" the impact broke everything inside of 10 meters, clones included. Sasuke and Naruto each flew backwards; both of them wide-eyed, dumbfounded and afraid. 'How strong is he?'

"Which punks are in my way now!" Garp roared. "Stay out. I'm swimming after Luffy!" Ready to dive in and with nobody around to stop him, Garp left the shore to plunge under. Fighting the stormy waters with ease, he swam out 3/4er's to the escape ship until everything began spinning in fresh current. 'WHaa? Who's moving water like this-a-aahhh-aaaaahhhhaaaaahhhhhh....'

Caught in a vortex the fighter could only feel himself spinning. Gradually the sensation evolved into some shifting force, all until something solid hit his back, followed by a second dose and a third close behind.

"Water-style: Giant-vortex jutsu." Up above, Hatake Kakashi's Sharingan watched his jutsu sweep up the swimming man. His genin assembled on the roof of the same building.

"Hey, thanks for grabbing me Kakashi-sensei," Naruto called up, with Sasuke sitting beside him and Sakura behind the Uchiha.

"Naruto," Kakashi turned towards them, with ire. "I commanded you all to depart on the ship. Why did you three remain here, and disobey me." The weight of authority hit the Cabin-Genin hard, two pausing from fear and respect. "Why wouldn't we, sensei? We came because you gave us a bigger order, and we gotta follow it, ya know." Frowning up, ignoring the cue of command, Naruto was stubborn as ever.

"The day we got to stay ninjas. You said anyone who breaks a rule is scum, but everyone who leaves somebody behind is worse than scum. We didn't leave you with Zabuza, so why did you think we'd do it now?"

Shaken from his task, Kakashi turned his face to his knuckle-head student. Then over to the other half of their quartet.

"And we arrived at the perfect time again, Kakashi," Sasuke stepped up beside Naruto. "Everything wound up well and we can run over water now to reach the boat casually."

"Sasuke's right," Sakura joined in. "Sensei, you said so yourself we have to stay together to survive. If anything happens to you then we can't learn about ninja-arts. When Naruto brought up the bell test we came out here together. If we can beat the Vice-Admiral that way, then we get to stay together too, right?"

Caught in his own trap, Kakashi let a chuckle mix with his sigh. "I suppose... I truly did teach this to you. And again, you came up with an excellent plan. That distraction let me execute a water-vortex jutsu and I'm certain that enemy has a devil-fruit as well. I have a

clone trapping him inside a Water prism right now. Our roles here are finished."

Leaping back to their feet, Team 7 made for the base of the building then continued jogging to the water's edge; hardly in a rush in their confidence that danger was gone.

"That old guy sure was strong. Good thing he was stupid and dived into the water after we got knocked away." At Naruto's comment, somebody came to a screeching halt. "What? Naruto, you witness Garp diving in to swim? My jutsu didn't trap him in that vortex?"

"Yes. Didn't you see it, Kakashi?" Sasuke questioned his teacher, bringing the other to pause.

"You Brats!" Up above them, something was falling with a fist cocked and ready. Scattering, the team weren't struck dead-on but the shockwave that followed knocked every ninja off their feet.

'He broke out from the water? Aren't devil fruits supposed to weaken somebody when they get submerged?' Grasping his bearings again, Kakashi felt a stone in his belly at the enemy Marine right before him; turning around with dark eyes.

"Try and drown me, that makes me mad!" Garp barked out. "But you tore me away from chasing Luffy, again. I shouldn't even be giving you runt my time!"

"No, you're not capturing our captain! Multi-Shadow-Clone jutsu!" On rooftops, walls, gardens and the ground several scores of Naruto's surrounded them. Everyone charged in while Sasuke made for the roof-tops too and Sakura made to hide behind a portico.

Lunching punches, kicks and more, none of the Naruto's made any dent while Garp scythed threw all as a mower over weeds. "Fire-style: Great Fireball jutsu!" Up above, another fresh fireball came for the Vice-admiral, driving his anger a notch higher.

"Quit spitting fire at me, punk. Those ain't gonna hurt at all!" True to his word, Garp drew in one massive breath and let it loose. Slowing to fireball until the flames withered away. Quickly only the trace embers from the flare shifted around to land beyond their target.[2]

Glaring up, Garp found a certain boy wearing a terrified face. They only met for a second before the Monkey caught a foot flying right for his face!

Throwing himself in a side-flip, Kakashi's opposite ankle missed the old man's chin. So he pulled in the foot that was caught, except another fist nearly met the ninja's head. Bending his neck, cheek-to-shoulder, the punch met only the air under the Sharingan's gaze.

Now the Jonin was scared. 'Guy has been faster, but none of his blows carry that kind of impact. Is this man like Lady Tsunade-?'

"Got-ya!" Lacing both arms in a bear hug, the Vice-Admiral started squeezing. "You think back up and a trap like that'll stop me?" The two men were struggling together, Garp crushing down on Kakashi until something very, very strange happened.

"Stop picking on our sensei! Take this!" Naruto's voice announced where he was, running straight behind Garp as something made the man stop cold. Above them, another Genin was running with a sword drawn in the rain.

"I'm going to crush you!" Naruto made his own mad dash while Sasuke let out one burst of speed; both Genin stealing a tiny fraction of their foe's attention away from Kakashi.

Swivelling to free his arms, Kakashi's hands were dancing. "Naruto, Sasuke, abort! Lightning style: Electric Needle Spark!" raising his right hand to the sky, electricity grew coursing through Kakashi's body right into the man holding him.

"GGHHHHRRRR!" Gritting his teeth at the shock, Garp's powerful grip slackened; letting Kakashi escape untouched to join Sasuke's

aborted run. But somebody hadn't heard the order and was too close now! "Take my kick-"

"No!" barely close enough, something hit Naruto, sending the boy skidding across the rain-soaked road. Struggling to push himself up, the duo with Sharingan found Sakura materializing in view right above her teammate. "Naruto, you fool! That was our plan, but take a second look next time! Sensei electrocuted him and you nearly got hit too!"

Beyond them, Sasuke and Kakashi watched Garp pull himself out of the shock. "Whada ya keep doing to me! Why're kids like you jumping into this fight?"

"Hey, we aren't kids, believe it!" Naruto called back, careening his head to try and see. "We're ninjas and we're pirates. All of us are going to the Grand Line, so you're not getting Captain Luffy at all. Ugly old man!"

"Huh? Why'd you say that? Did Luffy give such an idea to you shrimps?" Garp growled across to them. The menacing downpour cast Team 7's enemy in a darker shade, cracking both knuckles together with a grin. "Well, maybe this is a problem worth my attention. If you all want to play at being criminals, I'll tan your rears like a bunch of criminals."

Each of the Genin was sweating, the picture of his threat giving their minds a shock of indignity. While Garp was moving with both hands raised, Kakashi met the charge in front of his students. "Earth-style: Mud-Wave!"

"Shave!"

"Scatter!" Dropping in a roll, Kakashi watched Sakura copy him, barely escaping a fight-ending hit drop from above. Naruto was nailed, yet vanished in smoke. Sasuke wasn't seen anywhere near Garp as the Jonin and Marine began a round of kickboxing. Trading blows and blocks, the Jonin sent two spinning kicks he weaved

under a triple-punch combo. Ducking around sledge-hammers, smoke erupted from under Kakashi's feet.

"Huh-Chhr-CHHH!" leaving his opponent coughing, the Jonin snuck away through his own vanishing skill, a shushin, to land on a roof above him. Forcing his mind and heart back to a steady pace, new thoughts were coursing through Kakashi's mind. 'Sasuke must have witnessed the same thing I had through our sharingan. That Naruto was the real one. Perhaps another shadow clone was waiting to bail him out. This Garp, I didn't even manage to plant my hand and trigger the mud-wave jutsu before he was on top of us. Not only did he vanish like a substitution, but-'

"Meteor Fist!" Something tore through the wall close by, sending splinters in a shower mere centimetres from Kakashi's head. "You found me again?" A curling lip answered the question, as Garp seized Kakashi by his shoulder, the man ready for a punch that never came. Instead, the hand came down on Kakashi's hip, pressing around for a nasty surprise.

"How ya like this?" Pulling together, too fast to switch away, Garp sent Kakashi for a spin, spiralling in place so fast the world became a blur. All until one, fresh punch landed on him, driving the Jonin back to ground level to collide with the pavement.

"Sensei!"

Dazed and shaking, Kakashi nonetheless felt the full impact that time; dragging one hand around his ribs. 'Nothing... feels broken... at least,' barely pushing aside the shock to reach his feet, the man felt a separate blow land even deeper than that hit. 'This man... he's a monster....bigger than anyone I've fought with before. Can we... survive?'

"Hey, you giant, farting, Meany! Take this! Shadow-clone Jutsu!" For the second time, a company of Naruto's filled the block, charging right for Garp with a fresh idea in their minds... grinning together dangerously as silently snuck around.

"That power ain't gonna do nothing to me, squirt. Time to end your sensei here, whoever he is. Then you three get my full attention." Garp leapt down with his promise, to watch something unseen dragging the downed Kakashi away from where he landed.

Distracting the Monkey D. just enough for all the Naruto to get close, with a certain surprise. "Transform: Sexy Harem Jutsu: Swimsuit Edition!" On command, every clone replaced itself with a lady sporting blonde pigtails and clad in some form of swimsuit. Pink, orange and red bikinis, a few polka-dot one-pieces, one in a halter-top, two black underwire, plus even a leopard-print Monokini. Even under a storm, Kakashi froze at spotting an outfit with cheeky bottoms and a second in a thong. Every female-"Naruko" was wearing something this time, yet the libido factor rose by a notch.

'Hehehe, this always works on old guys,' Naruto chuckled. 'Sanji-senpai sure was right about mixing some variety. Those magazines he showed me-" A solid fist broke the moment, nailing the real Naruto square in the face.

"What's up with you, punk!" Flying backwards, again, with a steaming lump on his head, bewilderment for the impossible filled Naruto. "WHa..did that not... how can-"

"What the heck was that for? You think I just won't punch anyone if they're a girl?" Garp was standing tall, alone, after getting rid of all the girls. "I punch anyone no matter who they are. Did you think just lookin' like a girl would stop me?"

Even Sakura and Kakashi were stumped. "Is he, that guy wasn't bothered by all those girls at all?" Sakura questioned, incredulously. "Okay, he really is related to Captain Luffy," Sasuke replied. "Neither were bothered by that useless skill. And the one time a distraction is exactly what we need, Naruto pulls the wrong thing out from his hat."

Each Genin felt a tap on their shoulders, while Naruto was back to his feet at a certain cerebral loss. "That... that distraction always works on everyone. Why didn't you fall for it? Aren't you a guy too?"

"BWahahahahahahahaha! I don't get distracted this deep in my job, brat," Garp answered him, his head thrown back laughing. "And what was the point about girls that close to naked? I don't see any-huh? WHaa?" His words becoming prophetic, Garp indeed couldn't see anything. Around him, the neighbourhood was beset with Mist, again. Too dense to see beyond a foot and growing thicker by the second.

"Huh? What smells like it's burning?" A fresh explosion answered his question; so intense that while it engulfed the Marine, a wave of heat could be felt two blocks away; where Team 7 was running.

"How come that failed? I was sure it would work! Maybe the bikinis were a bad idea and only fully naked will-"

"Drop the matter, Naruto!" Kakashi stopped his student's thoughts. "It was worth a shot. Though be careful with how Nami hears about that. Somehow I don't think she will be very thrilled with it now that you both are brother and sister."

"Sensei, those paper bombs I set on Mr Garp. Do you think they'll work and stop him?" Sakura's question soon found its answer, as another building behind them collapsed; its roof bending over and into the misty layer below.

All of Team 7 look on, swallowing another blow to their chances of winning the fight.

"Is that man made of concrete? Kakashi," Sasuke asked, fearfully, "he broke away from the water and can swim, so he shouldn't possess a Devil-fruit. But nobody except a ninja should have that much power in them. Is he a human at all, or something else like Arlong and his fishmen were?"

"I'm not certain, Sasuke," Kakashi answered him. Glancing around, the squad were on a separate pier one with the wooden docks. The Going Merry was still close by, where the Jonin's Sharingan found Zoro, Sanji and Gin dog-pilled over a struggling Luffy.

All as a wave of something staggered Kakashi. 'I've spent too much chakra here, between several clones, getting to the ship and having my Sharingan out for so long. Wait... chakra?' Going back to everything he'd seen, details from his eye passed through Kakashi's mind. 'He hasn't been using any! Whatever source lends to Garp-san's strength, it isn't drawn from chakra at all, or anything that leaves a similar trace. I can't copy anything he does, nor found a weakness to it. This is bad.'

Turning back between his team, fighting back a flare of desperation, Kakashi devised a plan. "Everybody. This fight needs to end, and quickly. That might only happen if we leave Garp too crippled or dazed to pursue us. Listen closely."

A minute later, Monkey D. Garp reached the scene, finding Kakashi standing there waiting for him and spotting the Going Merry further out in the water. "Luffy! Get back here now you little miscreant! You almost die right in front of me, then go running off? Is that any way to treat your Grandpa?"

"Well, is bursting through a wall to punch him any sort of way to treat your Grandson, Monkey D.-san?" With one hand raised and ready, Kakashi's efforts barely survived a fresh interruption:

"Grandpa! I'm sorry, but I'm still staying a pirate!" Luffy's call sailed over the water from the Merry. "Being a Marine is too boring, and don't hurt my nakama!"

Kakashi found Garp moving his eyes, then lent a signal to somebody out of sight. "Nooooooooo! I'm not losing you, boy," Garp exclaimed. "Not like Ace-huh?" A tiny, dark-red ball fell inches from Garp's face. Explosions followed, from the Marine's feet as a shuriken sliced the air-born pellet. Red sauce of some kind splattered out, staining his eyes. Garp let out a roar, throwing his face to the sky while flames erupted, fighting against the dark smoke engulfing the rest of the man.

"Naruto, take your shot!"

"Here I go! Shadow clone jutsu!" Bursting through a doorway, three orange ninjas ran straight for the blinded Marine. One held a kunai in his hands, with two copies ahead of him. Garp swang around, yet connected with air; one clone duct low, sliding over puddles around Garp, as the other stopped to grab the third. It threw the kunai-wielding clone left, while said human projectile crossed both hands. "And another, shadow-clone: Jutsu!"

A fourth materialized, forming a platform to let that one jump-off, launching for the other clone. Garp sent out a shout, turning around and bent over to strike both together; yet the thrower-Naruto behind him grinned.

"Come right here and hit us!" the pair taunted together, throwing the kunai back to the thrower, while Kakashi spotted a paper bomb wrapped over the handle. The thrower-Naruto caught it, as Garp slammed both fists on the duo-Naruto's, both vanishing under his touch. 'The original stayed behind him,' Kakashi realized, 'but what for-'

"Take this! Hidden Leaf secret Taijutsu. Straight from the teachings of Kakashi-sensei: One Thousand Years of Death!" Naruto shot forwards, as his sensei's world hit a full stop. "What? Huh? Naruto I said-"

"Got'em!" Cutting off the complaint with his success, Naruto grinned at feeling his kunai sink into something and then leapt away. While the flames and rain dissipated the smoke, Kakashi felt himself melting when he spotted something sticking out from Garp's rear; and smoking.

"Boom!" The umpteenth explosion of the day engulfed the Marine, even making the monster hop in place. "Ow-ow-ow-ow-what made my butt start burning!" Garp exclaimed. Even the fabric of his suit had a hole blown open, showing dark black boxers.

Fittingly, the one person who'd seen this before didn't skip a beat. "Demon-wind Shuriken! Windmill of shadows!" slicing through the air

with sounds, the weapons honed in for their target. Naruto was skidding backwards until something collided with him. Kakashi had to shake his head to get back in the game. 'Sakura caught him and maintained her jutsu after dropping those smoke bombs and the tobasco star around Garp. When I told Naruto to 'distract' Garp... actually I should have known that would happen. But now, I need to end this.'

The demon-wind shuriken made a single pass around Garp, then split apart beyond him. Circling back on separate vectors, the Vice-Admiral swept the hot sauce from his eyes and caught sight of them before meeting each with a punch. The weapons shattered, one after the other, to sprinkle the ground with metal shards. But once Garp turned around, something struck him dead on the chin.

The massive man went skywards, dangling in the air from a kick to his jaw. Down below, Kakashi was crouching low until he became a blur; reappearing behind Garp and muttering "Gate of Opening." A rush of power followed, with strength flowing about Kakashi's muscles to deliver several more kicks. Each one propelled Monkey D. Garp further into the air, Kakashi even noticed bruises forming from his impacts.

'He's not invincible. This should work.'

Drawing a line of wire from his hand, the "Copy-ninja" circled it around the Marine and held fast. Binding the man's arms with too much strength to let him escape, Kakashi wrapped both arms and both legs around his foe and started spinning.

Gradually at first, the speed of this rotation grew steadily. Faster and faster, both men quickly resembled a dropping spin top as the ground below grew closer. "Huh-, Bwa-, whadaya doing to me? Ahhhhhhhh-!"

"Konoha Secret Technique: Hidden Lotus!" With no chance to catch his bearings, Garp struck the ground harder than a pile-diver.

Hammering through concrete, the hole under him grew deeper until a splash flew up through the opening.

Kakashi quickly reappeared, skidding away from the impact to a stop beside Naruto and Sakura. 'I hope that would make you proud, Guy.'

"Whoa!... Sensei, sensei, sensei, that was so cool!" Naruto leapt up, shaking with glee towards his fatigued sensei. "What was that? Another big secret! You gotta teach me that. What's it called? What's it called? What's it called? What's it called?" More and more demands followed until Sasuke rejoined the group and Sakura reappeared amongst them.

"Naruto," Kakashi answered the pleading. "I'll tell you of that move later, but while each of you did spectacularly, why did you use.....that move... on Garp? It weakened the ground underneath him, and my Hidden Lotus smashed through the stone with ease." Kakashi admonished his student, rising back to his feet.

"I wanted to leave him stuck in the ground, not fall underwater beneath it. Now there may be a risk he could die from drowning. I need to fish him out from the water. Or call a few Marines over to save him."

"Kakashi, why bother with that?" Looking over to the hole, Sasuke lingered on the mangled remains of his shuriken, then drew out a kunai. "A shinobi would make sure they aren't being followed. If we do not make sure he is finished, that man might hunt us later and-"

"No!" That single word became a brick wall to Sasuke, stopping not only him but the other two close by. Kakashi was glaring at his student, echoing a certain disapproving mood each could recognize. "The goal was never to kill this enemy, Sasuke. Obstacle, or ally, he is still Captain Luffy's Grandfather. Why should..? No. How can we end his life and still travel with Luffy? Do you truly want to test the limits of your abilities by killing somebody else's family? As one man... once did to yours."

That sucker punch slammed deep into Sasuke's gut, so much more literal than verbal. Folding over, the Uchiha staggered for breath under Kakashi's accusation about... that night. While one of them tried to recover, Kakashi closed his right eye but kept watch on this student and spoke with Naruto and Sakura. "The three of you will make for the Going Merry. I will-"

Behind the four of them, Kakashi was silenced by a spout erupting from the water. Whirling around, lightning lit up the skies to highlight a horrifying sight. "THAT. HURT. YOU. MAGGOT!" Monkey D. Garp, impossibly, was attacking the four again. His Sharingan tucked away, Kakashi failed to predict how this juggernaut wasn't aiming for him. Dropping low, Garp bypassed Kakashi and nearly struck Naruto and Sakura had Sasuke not body-tackled them out of the way.

His fists sinking into fresh crevices, Garp withdrew both to spin around and punch the closest thing in reach: Naruto. Taking the blow to his chest, the Uzumaki went flying, skidding over the water until he fell below it with a splash.

"Sakura, Sasuke, grab Naruto," Kakashi ordered them both, while he reached for a scroll. Both Genin looked from their sensei to the water, neither moving as something loomed over them both. Garp's furious temper was blazing on his face, ready to snatch both the brats inside his reach until a fresh crackling sound drew his attention.

Looking to his right, a jagged scythe arced around to cleave into the Vice-Admiral. The Hero was too quick, grabbing the blade by one jagged edge with his hand and holding it there. Kakashi held the hilt of his weapon, his Sharingan uncovered now as he pressed further with the Saw-blade that once belonged to Arlong.

"Do whatever you wish to me, Garp-san. Strike one of my students... all bets are off. If you want to pursue the Captain, you will need to get me off from your tail first, Vice-Admiral," the Jonin promised, pressing hard into the Hero's monstrous grip. "Chasing Luffy, and taking the others is something I won't allow."

"Why? You think you can stop me? ME? YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO I AM, YOU DAMN FOOL?" Garp continued glaring, then his hand flexed and cracks split along the solid steel of the Saw blade.

Kakashi upped the ante by channelling chakra down the length of his weapon. Lightning crackled to life about the Saw-blade. In a wince, Garp faltered his grip, to meet a kick to his face for the trouble. Rain mixed with an acrid scent of burnt flesh, lighting chakra still running the length of the saw-blade as Kakashi swung it about. Pressing his enemy back, the Sharingan pulled double duty: predicting Garp's moves to box him in, and tracing Sasuke and Sakura pulling Naruto out from the water.

Pressing in, Kakashi sent several more swings that Garp either dodged or blocked; the sleeves of his suit paying the price. Until on one swing, Garp's massive fist closed over the weapon again. Both men held tight, but this time Garp was utterly unbothered holding the lightning chakra-laced weapon in his hand.

"Uhr....rrrrrr. What the hell are you, kid? These many powers shouldn't exist in just a random nobody," Garp complained.

"Sensei! We have Naruto!" Sakura called over from the water and sealed Kakashi's decision.

"WHAAAAAA?! That-what-how-when-who are you?" Garp's voice matched his head, shaking left and right to look back over at the Genin. "What is that? A power that lets you stand up on the water?"

"I'll tell you about it. If you manage to kill me," Kakashi replied, pulling his weapon free and ready for a self-sacrifice. Turning his head, the man's eye met each of his students.

"Ninja Arts: Mist-jutsu!"

"Lemme off. I gotta get back and help them!"

"Luffy, eeghhhr, didn't you say you never won a fight with this guy? They're doing this so we can get away. Don't let it be for nothing!" Sanji was struggling with the Captain's arms. Zoro lay over top of the cook with Luffy's legs, as Gin and Usopp worked together trying to tie up the limbs into knots.

He wasn't the only one trying to go back either. "Naruto! Usopp, I need to have to help him!" The sniper and the navigator were wrestling by the railing, Nami trying to dive in after her brother was punched by Garp.

"Uggh... Nami, what can you do? It's too dangerous, and Sakura and Sasuke can help him too," the sniper replied, fighting down his own guilt. 'Buggy smashed my slingshot when they captured me. If only I had one spar, I'd be able to shoot from here with covering fire!'

"Nami, Luffy, we can't run back into that fight," Zoro berated his captain. "Captain, you've been thinking a little bit lately, so do some more. Your grandpa might be after you, but do you think he'll just let the rest of us go? Like Gin and me after what we've done to the Navy?"

"There's worse at hand than that, Moss-head," Sanji replied, now with a bruise over his face. "The ninjas chose to come with us to get them back home. If they tried going with the Marines, bastards might force them to enlist, then won't let them go. Somebody who can walk over water like they can are too valuable. If we get caught, Naruto and the others might lose their freedom. Kakashi had that in mind and that's why he stayed to fight alone."

Looking up for the pier, the cook was fighting his own instincts to swim back and help protect both Sakura and his fresh student. Until something drew a smile on his face.

"Miss. Nami! We're here!" Four little words brought every action on board to a halt. Looking up together, the Straw hats found their ninja-nakama vault over the railing of the Merry. Sasuke was carrying Naruto, with Sakura beside him and Kakashi bringing up the rear.

Nami broke free from Usopp immediately, dashing for the boys. Luffy threw each of his men off but could only flop around with each of his limbs tied up with each other. "You guys are back! You're back, you're back-"

Sanji and Gin made for Sakura, noting all the bruises covering her. Kakashi stood back apart from them as Zoro stared beyond him... for how little they could see. The entire bay was engulfed in dense mist, made even more terrifying by a massive roar erupting from inside.

"Everybody," Kakashi drew their attention. "I managed to execute this jutsu, but it cost me a large amount of chakra. We-" immediately, the jonin's knees buckled underneath him. Usopp caught the man, barely, and both exhausted crew-mates stayed upright on willpower alone. "... we... leave... leave..." Kakashi didn't finish, but his message got through.

"Nami! Sail us away from here! Naruto and Usopp need help! And somebody please untie me!" Luffy's orders hit everyone, the crew driven into a buzz of activity. "Set loose the sails. Gin, grab onto to helm," Nami called.

"Moss-head, help Kakashi get inside," Sanji barked, "Usopp and Naruto as well. They're way too out of it to help here."

"Alright," Zoro nodded. "You untie Luffy," Zoro replied while lopping one arm around his grey-haired crewmate and slinging Naruto over his shoulder.

Nami kept delivering instructions without moving more than two meters from Naruto while she helped Usopp after Zoro to get inside the Lounge. Cruising just along the edge of the mist, the Going Merry caught strong winds leading out from Loguetown. Speeding over waves and rain, the ship quickly moved beyond the town while the mist within started dissipating the further their distance they grew.

Once Luffy was up he helped with sailing the ship before charging into the Lounge for Naruto and Kakashi. "Hey! Are they okay?" Kakashi was sitting on a barrel while Naruto was laying over the dinning-table, both conscious again. "I... I think I'm okay, Captain Luffy. Ow..." rubbing his middle, the Uzumaki took some deep, sore breaths. "Your Grandpa hits real hard, ya know."

"Okay, but you!" Luffy whirled around on Kakashi, grabbing the man by his collar to hoist him right up to his face. "Why did you hit me over like that! My crew got hurt enough, it'd be better if I stayed to fight with Grandpa, not you! Why, old man? Why? Why?" Nami felt torn, between getting Luffy to drop Kakashi and wanting to stay close to Naruto.

"Captain," Kakashi answered. "I did so because you and I want the same thing. We'd both rather not see any comrades in danger. Us getting hurt is fine, or even if we die it wouldn't bother us. Watching someone else take that pain, though..."

"Stop that excuse!" Luffy demanded while the others inside the room and even out on the deck felt a chill running up their spines. "Yeah, I'm okay with that. All of us decided to do this, and if we die, we die. There's nothing to it but that. I'd rather I get hurt than my crew, though. You are my crew, so don't go do that again without me, Kakashi. You got that?"

"No, I don't." The jonin's reply sent heads spinning between him and the captain.

"Why. Do I gotta hit you until you get it?" Luffy asked him, raising one fist level with his shoulder. Naruto even flinched at how much Luffy even mirrored the behemoth they'd just got away from.

"No, and if that didn't work when you're Grandpa tried it, doing the same to us isn't really a good choice," Kakashi smoothly answered. "I don't get it... because I am afraid... I am not really here."

Water droplets spilt on the floor beneath "Kakashi." Luffy's knees buckled under him, and the Devil-fruit user was hit with a sudden drained of any energy he had. "If any of you turn back," "Kakashi" kept talking looking over the occupants of the room, "then the real me won't rejoin any of you. He can escape from Garp easily, then steal a boat. Stay out from Loguetown, then wait for him to catch up."

His message delivered, "Kakashi" melted before them, quickly becoming only a puddle of seawater.

"Lightning-style: Thunderbolt!" Inside the misty blanket obscuring the bay mixed with a sudden high-volt lightning burst. Channelling his power, a certain painful exclamation signalled the ninja his own target was struck. Ending the jutsu, Kakashi slipped away deep underground.

'That... the genjutsu I cast on Naruto, Sakura and Sasuke must have worked. None of them noticed how I wasn't moving until after the Mist fell around. Hopefully, the clone will fool everybody and they won't come back.'

'All of this...' The man was panting now. Both chakra and muscle fatigue partnered together, warning Kakashi of how little he had left to fight with. 'I only need to escape and lie low. The Hidden lotus and so many jutsu's haven't left me with much to spare.'

'I might have just enough to move part-way across the town through this Underground-Move jutsu. Then finding a way to hide and recover are the first priority.'

Shifting through the earth, nearly swimming about, Kakashi spent what little chakra he could safely spare moving away from the port. Some minutes later, hoping the crew had actually followed his orders that time, the slippery ninja moved near to the surface where he felt building foundations.

'Slipping up from here might only meet wooden planks. Tenzo would be useful to have right now. Perhaps I can find a garden and-' Everything stopped when the superstructure above him shook. Reflexively, Kakashi slipped deeper as the earth above him buckled and shattered.

Feeling the now very-thin layer of earth above him, a voice declared what was happening: "I know you're down there, red-eye! Luffy got away. And you're the only one left for me to punch! Get up here, you!"

Grasping that Garp was above him, Kakashi slid forwards as fast as he could manage. 'What is happening? Garp can move through water, so this cannot be a devil fruit's power. Unless there is something else I'm not aware of. Do these Marines train members to sense where a person is? What don't I know?'

Moving about, another rumble above him appraised that Jonin that Garp was following him, and too close for comfort. 'I'm low on chakra, I can't summon Pakun or separate help, nor can I escape with him this close. All the enemy pirates are beaten or might have retreated by now, and this is the most dangerous man I've even been in a fight with.' Pushing himself further, Kakashi worked to set as much distance from the nearly-rabid intensity he felt under this pursuit. And every effort, or all his delicate care, drained what little he had even further.

'I have maybe enough chakra for two A-rank jutsu and only taijutsu. Genjutsu won't be effective on Garp, and a Hidden-mist technique to enclose the ward took more than I could spare. My Sharingan is too draining, but I can barely trace his movement's without it! What usable things do I have left?'

Nearly a minute continued, mixed with tremors to signal how many buildings were flattened behind the Jonin. Finally, after a stretch too safe for comfort, the space ahead of Kakashi shook like a bomb. And within the two seconds he had to alter direction, something seized his leg.

Yanked out from underground, Kakashi flailed around until something solid met his back and skull. White light burst in his eyes, briefly, while he coughed blood under his mask. Kakashi's sight returned in time to see solid ground coming up to his face. Realizing something held his ankle, somebody kept failing the Jonin around to slam him on the ground in any random direction he chose. Five-impacts later the grip let go and the Hatake flew up into the air.

"Ooops!" The shout from the ground was little-comfort, but it gave the ninja a window to grasp his bearings and land softly on a wall. Finding nothing was broken, instinct saved Kakashi from another wrecking ball. Leaping away to watch a hole form in the space where he stood a second earlier, Kakashi went on the run, working to build space between himself and the angry Vice-Admiral.

"You ain't getting' away from me now, brat! Quit makin' things harder for you!" Garp was hot in pursuit, knocking apart one chunk from a building after the other, somehow always getting away ahead of them collapsing down over him.

With enough space between them, Kakashi spun around and planted both feet. Between each hand, he held some 20 shuriken with something else mixed in over his fingers. 'Saving these don't matter at this point. All I need is some way to escape.'

Tossing all of them straight for Garp, Kakashi's hands were flying. "Lightning style: Shuriken Lightning-web trap!" True to its name, first every spinning star became alive with lightning; second an intricate web of electric currents spread between them in a massive projecting spider-web.

Kakashi's timing was perfect, enough without his Sharingan, as Garp met the trap head-on. The Vice-Admiral clenched his teeth but didn't stop. The move only faltered his charge for under a moment; all the time that Kakashi needed. Every star that wasn't stopped flew around their target, spinning the last of Kakashi's ninja wire behind them. Dozens of strands encircled the Vice-admiral, the man pulling against them and taking his focus off Kakashi.

"Fire-style: Dragon Flame Jutsu!" 'Please, let this work, else I'll need to fall back on that,' Kakashi pleaded, while he released his jutsu: casting forth a massive body of flames swirling in the spectre of a dragon.

Their intensity built into a roar as the flaming dragon made straight for Garp, covering the short span between both men... too slow to work. The fewer restraints weren't enough and Garp Broke free, bursting them apart and met the attack straight-on with his fist.

Echoing his moniker, "Garp the Fist," that punch carried the force to hold the Dragon in place and then propelled the flames back where they came from. Watching the inferno, Garp waited to spot his enemy, but a fresh distraction came first.

"Huh? Wha...." Trying to follow his ears, some ringing echoes and whining of birds range throughout the street Garp stood in. Enough to number a thousand, this distraction occupied his attention while Kakashi dashed in.

"Chidori!" Crouching low, his Sharingan backed out, and holding a wild pocket of lighting in one arm, Kakashi honed in for his target: Garp's left leg. 'I'm sorry Luffy. If this man can still run, we won't meet up again. A leg injury will stop him.'

Or it wouldn't. Kakashi's eye widened as it predicted the impossible. 'No.'

True to what he saw, Garp spun around in a crouch without even looking at Kakashi, his fist travelling in one arc at ankle level. Without sacrificing balance to deliver his strength, Garp's bare fist met Kakashi's Chidori and a battle of wills ensued.

Crackling lightning raised to higher volume, while Garp's face morphed into absolute focus; a level Kakashi had never seen before as desperation built-up in his soul. Both men pressed forwards, the Ninja channelling what little he still had while searching for some trace or hint of a crack to press in on. Garp was the picture of a

mountain: solid, imposing and unmovable. Gradually the iconic weapons of both fighters clashed together, lasting for over a minute and generating crackling spurts of black energy around them both.[3] All until one ran dry of its power.

Kakashi felt the power of his jutsu ebbing away and he bent over to avoid the upwards-arc of the punch. Garp's opposite hand snagged the jonin by his collar, pulling the man into a fresh bear hug. Letting out a roar to echo his strength, the Marine bent backwards. A Supplex drove Kakashi straight into the ground again, hard enough to nearly crack his skull.

"You're not making any fancy hand moves on me! Time to end this and lock you up so Luffy has to come back to me!" Garp delivered on his promise rising back up and shifting Kakashi a few notches higher in his grip. Both hands trapped and separated, Garp followed with a sickening powerbomb, dropping Kakashi forwards to slam on the ground, right over the back of his skull.

Experience rang through what little of his mind Kakashi still had to think with. 'That hit should at least cause a mild concussion, so I don't have much left. He's learned too much about me, too. Taijutsu is out, and I don't have any ninjutsu that can be-' Trapped in a desperate situation, a single option appears in the back of Kakashi's memory. Out of anything else, and aware he had very little of anything to work with, the man tried for it. Wiggling his arms as Garp held him back up, one got free and opened its palm.

"What?" Garp frowned, feeling something coming up, but the picture was quite fuzzy; unlike the other warnings he'd had from Kenbushoku Haki throughout that night.[4] Inside Kakashi's left hand, a spiralling pocket of chakra was forming. Pressing further power inside it, the Jonin felt the last of what chakra he still had fed into the move. Forcing himself to focus, the power began rotating over itself, compressing together to form a tight, whirling sphere. A bewildering orb took shape, stabilizing in the centre of Kakashi's palm. His final chance for escape. "Rasengan!"

The move met Monkey D. Garp's right shoulder. Grinding his teeth, the Vice-Admiral felt its power, in a very, very bad way.

'Huh? This thing? It's grinding into me, and even through my Haki?'

"You gotta move that can beat Haki!" Garp exclaimed. In shock, his grip loosened only enough for Kakashi to free himself. Still pressing forwards, the Rasengan left his palm and grew larger against Monkey D. Garp. Not waiting to see the results, Kakashi spun around and ran for all his life.

Garp kept struggling, the last attack of the battle still pressing against his shoulder, then growing outwards across the man's whole form. Nearly encompassing him, the figure inside the sphere planted himself and did not budge. Then a mighty black fist slammed over the Rasengan, driving it towards the ground and compressing such power with it.

The ground exploded, throwing a fresh dust cloud into the air, before rain settled the debris and showed Garp sunk into a wide, spirally hole so deep he could stand up and his head wasn't clear of the wide maw. Glaring down at his handy work, Garp flexed his hand slightly. 'Damn. I nearly channelled Conqueror's Haki to contain that move.' the man confessed, honest to a fault.

'Why'd that guy hold-out on a move like this until now? If that spinning thingy had been coming for my head, I mightda had to pull out my Blue Hole to counter it.'

"But if I go and do that, this whole town ain't gonna be standing anymore. BWAahahahahahaha!"

Leaping out from the shallow crater, the Hero of the Marines looked about before choosing which direction to follow. 'I don't feel where this guy went like before. Did he finally escape, or drop dead?'

A handful of turned and several various roads followed. After not finding his prey for several minutes, looked about to find a tall

building close by. "I'll look up there." Clearing the building in a single leap, the man landed atop the tower to search across the storm-beset city.

"Hmmm. Where'd that guy go for? He's my key to force Luffy to come sailing back. And, maybe he'll share a few doughnuts with me. I haven't had this much fun in a fight since Roger gave up and couldn't brawl anymore. Whoever this Kakashi is, he sure is excited to brawl this good."

"Hmhmhmhmhmhmhmhmhmhm." A new, and dangerously familial chuckle came behind the Hero of the Marines. "Quite a feat to accomplish, and only you would complement somebody after nearly trying to kill them."

Garp froze! Nothing....of....him....not even a breath.....moved.

A voice. One he hadn't heard for decades. The tone of the singular greatest foe to all the World Government stopped him-cold.

Skywards high above him, the storm clouds were circling above, a mirror of the spirals that partner a maelstrom. Winds grew bolder, stronger by the second. Ink-dark shades were moved in, far too unrelenting to be pacified with the sun. Tension was building on the spot, ready to spark into a fight with any kind of clap.

Garp drew himself together, his absolute focus centred on exactly the man he knew was mere meters away.

Turning around, the Hero of the Marine found him: covered by an ink-green cloak and with somebody draped over his shoulder. Lightning lit up the sky, its flash casting light beneath the hood of the late arrival. The tattoo across his face betrayed the man's identity, the singular Worst Criminal in the World.

Merely a single foot shorter than the Vice-Admiral, the difference in size held nothing against the measure of danger both men could unleash should they fight. Neither feared the other, but Garp wanted

to pray nothing would happen from knowing how much demand from him a fight would steal. They were ground zero for a perfect storm.

One hesitant tiger atop a fearsome mountain and one dragon within a wild vortex.

"What are you doing here?" Garp muttered towards this man. "Why wait this long then step in? Did you come to drag more souls off on that crusade you're waging?"

"You still understand so little," the man spat full of contempt. "My purpose here is unfulfilled, that I shall not deny. As for waiting this long." Dragon looked over at one prone figure draped over his should. Garp noticed it was the very person he had been fighting.

"His name is Hatake Kakashi, if you didn't bother to learn it," Dragon continued. "To match you, even at a fraction of your real strength, is nothing short of amazing. And willing to sacrifice himself while those he called his allies could escape. That boy holds both fate and luck on his side."

"He nearly died tonight," Garp shot back, "And you were nowhere to be found. Why? Has he never mattered to you? Or do you believe that much in fate there was no reason to do anything?"

Across the rooftop, Dragon was glaring at the Marine. Controlling himself with something not natural at all for their family, he looked to the heavens and spoke. "I had been watching since before you ever reached here. At first, that was enough, but quickly the ones he asked to be crewmates captured my respect. Bonds have been made between them, with power far greater than any Marine would ever hope to forge. Curiosity left me to stand apart, and with each day the need to intervene diminished."

Silence followed this speech. Garp watched on while his company turned their head towards him. 'Huh? He's not looking at me but...' Following the line of his sight, the Marine and the Revolutionary gazed out at the same target.

"At the onset of your arrival, I decided to ensure he could still escape," Dragon explained. "After someone declared that one of his crew would die, half the group made to rescue him while the others came for their ship. I met them in that place, and spoke with this man directly."

"WWHHAAAAT!" Garp spun about, his mouth open like a gate. Until it shut with a shrug. "All right. Coming out in the open is hardly your style, but choose what you will."

Nodding, more than used to his company's habits, Dragon continued. "When they announced that my son would die, his friends took off to save him. You would arrive as well, yet that fate would close their escape the second you made for your own ship. I prevented that, and did you wonder why none of the Marines you sailed here with have joined in that battle?"

Monkey D. Garp cocked one head aside. Then realized how little he felt of anything from his own men of the 153rd Marine Branch. Looking around from their perch, and casting out with his Kenbushuko Haki, images of one squad after another were scattered about Loguetown. From the plaza to the pier, even the streets and back alleys, every Marine in the town was out cold.

None were dead, but neither were they moving.

"Most were too strong to intimidate and inhibit," Dragon continued. "And casting that power would have been too conspicuous for word to remain silent. I couldn't be in two different places and want to avoid more exposure than I need. I hoped Luffy's group would manage to evade or hold out against you long enough. But one of them fighting with you to purchase sufficient time for the escape on their own was surprising."

Slowly, deliberately, Monkey D. Dragon looked out to the sea. "That man is no longer a boy. Nothing can stand in his way from the destiny he chose for himself."

"Even when that destiny comes to kill him!" Garp growled to his company, curling both hands together. "Standing in my way will mean I gotta fight you. Actually, maybe I should, since you weren't there when Luffy needed everybody. I raised you, and yet you don't come running to save your own boy? Did abandoning him in Goa Kingdom make doing the same here so easy? How can you claim to be saving the world when you won't come and save your own son? You Fool!"

Slowly, the storm around them began churning into a cyclone. Monkey D. Dragon turned about, glaring at Garp with the power to leave even a Logia-type in agony. "All these years, and you still understand so little," a dangerous whisper emerge.

"You ahead of all others have seen the horrors practised by those who claim the world is there's. How many of them believe something trivial as bloodlines dictate what a person will become? And do they hold any credit for the efforts you made against the Rocks?"

"SAY nothing." Monkey D. Garp snarled back, with dark shades of power engulfing his fists. Worse, thin streams of black lightning flew out from both, indicating the further those words had coaxed Garp into answering with such power. Yet across from him, Dragon stood unbothered.

"So many claim the positions they were born to will dictate their lives, and throw away all they deem undesirable," Dragon continued. "Even from their own kin. I did leave Luffy behind, but not with ease nor without purpose."

"My goals are to build upon freedom, and to break the cycle those who lead the world are trapped inside of. Humility and exemplary means are the answers I will stand accountable to. Had he come with me, and others new who was my son, would these events have passed or been smothered without any chance to live?"

Slowly, Garp's fury wanned, easing away as his fist uncurled and both hands slid into his pockets. Between both men, the rain

continued falling as Dragon looked out in a separate direction. "No matter where I stand, I always felt some urge to look out towards the East." A thin smile crept over his face. "Perhaps the idea somebody shared with me rings true. But if Luffy had been raised with me, how many from my own ranks would expect him to follow at my side. Worse, they would press him to lead in my stead? How many would place one target over his back and deny him any life but one tethered to my goals and mission?"

"Leaving my son behind," Dragon explained. "It freed him of the cage my lineage would lock him inside of. Luffy does not know of me, and neither does the world. Now, even should some Marines learn of him, his life and fate are his own to choose."

After his last words were ended, Dragon felt one-half of the pressure surrounding them dissipate. Turning back to face his father, Monkey D. Garp had his mouth dropped so wide a du-gong would leap inside it. The man was barely moving, a picture shock so impossible Dragon even laughed.

A grin, one that only could be called wild, grew over Dragon's face. "I won't deny I have a desire to meet him again. Whether he will know who I am is not of any matter. Though selfish it may be. And for that same reason, I will not let you follow him and steal that freedom away, Old Man."

Still, for entire minutes now, the Hero of the Marines could barely respond. After mustering the effort to close his mouth, the man look out to the same direction his Grandson sailed. Several dozen moments followed, neither man breaking the silence from their thoughts. Even Kakashi, still slung over Monkey D. Dragon's shoulder wasn't moving at all.

"Hhhh
 hh
 hhh," An impossibly
 long sigh escaped from Garp's mouth. "Maybe... for once, you aren't
 wrong, kiddo," the man shared with his company. "I'm not stupid

enough to chase after you. But if that's what you think I won't go after Luffy either."

"So, you beat down all of my men here? How long are we gonna be stuck around here for?" At Garp's question, Dragon still smiled.

"Your old friend Bogard gave more fight than the rest. Those pirates who did try and kill Luffy won't be going anywhere."

"BWahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!
BWahahahahahahahahahahahaha!" Throwing his head back, the Hero's laugh carried all around through the town. "You're still that strong, eh? I'd be disappointed if you couldn't pull off something on that scale. Good luck to you, son."

Garp nodded to Dragon and then strode away. Leaving Dragon alone, with Kakashi out-cold over his shoulder.

Elsewhere on the East Blue, hardly a stone's-throw from Loguetown, a small squadron of Marine-ship battled against the storm. Aboard one vessel, an alarm bell cut through the silence of the dark night. Beset by powerful winds and an endless, diagonally downpour, men ran all about shouting about a child.

"The girl escaped. Find her! Search the entire ship! Use any means necessary! But don't rough her up, remember she's still a child!" Following orders, the half-decent Marines split up to track their quarry.

Many questioned how long such searching would take until an answer gave itself away. A scream cut through the deck, drawing attention to a child sliding in the water and stop was provided by a boat, the girl barely had a minute before-

"There! Get her!" Half running/half struggling against the weather, the Marine failed to reach their target before she was climbing.

Scaling the rope ladders up to the crows nest, some men called up from below.

"You're too high!" "Come down from there!" Some tried to follow, but one choice led to near-disaster. Cutting the ropes to keep them at bay, the girl severed the only support anchoring the mast in place.

Her scream followed the mast while it bent over in the wind; colliding with the second one. The impact knocked the sail loose, immediately catching the wind some unholy force sent the ship side-over, almost capsizing the whole vessel. "Take in that sail! Or we're all dead!" As the Marine held on against all their odds, the girl up above peered over the side of the crow's nest. Spotting one boat down below, she steeled herself; holding a small token about her neck.

'Grandpa Ryu. Please protect me.'

A fresh gust of wind sent the vessel further on its side, and closer to the rowboat far below. With total faith, Apis leapt over the side and was lost from anybody's sight. Hopeful that she'd find her way back and meet the Dragons, someday.

End.

So. In this chapter there is a lot I wanted to explore. Especially one subject which has been in my head for years now: Why Dragon abandoned Luffy. This answer to why Dragon left his son behind is all my own, yet it also would be the total opposite of everything the Celestial Dragons and other Nobles of the One Piece World obsess over. He is a highly complex individual, and I promise this will not be the last time he appears in Growth Through Chaos.

Separately, Garp vs. Kakashi was THE, THE hardest fight I have ever written before. Yes, Kakashi did contend with Garp, but at most was only able to wound him and had no idea just how dangerous that man could honestly be. For every who loves Kakashi: the Sharingan Warrior grew and evolved over the course of Naruto, almost as much as the rest of Team 7 did. For this fight, my

benchmark was Kakashi in the Nami no Kuni Arc, not the one who could fight Akatsuki members 2-on-1 and live to talk about it.

Kakashi is powerful, but in this setting he wasn't only out-matched, but he could copy or dissect anything in his opponent. Kakashi, in general, is specialized for fighting Ninja's; dissecting their moves and habits, copying their techniques, and using a natural weakness against them linked to chakra-arts or ninja-arts. Here, several x-factors were removed since Garp is a One Piece Marine, not a Naruto-ninja.

Still, he put up a damn good fight, so what will happen to him next?

The next chapter is already in the works, and as for Warship Island; I had to let Luffy get a bounty on his head somewhere before the Grand Line. The next chapter will have some fresh surprises: including one that is critical for this entire story and will impact all of the Straw Hat Pirate-Ninja's, to their souls.

[1]- Think of Whitebeard spearing a magma-rock and blowing it cool with only one deep breath. If he can do that, what not have Garp do the same?

[2]- When two individuals clash Haki-against-Haki, black sparks often form between them (unless both possess Conqueror's Haki). Here, I imagine Garp's focused power against the Chidori, or similar concentrated-jutsu would result in the same.

[3]- Throughout the fight, Garp could feel/predict Kakashi's location and action through Haki; at least while he was focused on him, or somebody else was focused on Garp. The more deliberate and detailed someone thinks against a Haki-user, the easier it is for them to predict what is coming. Hence why a certain move here nearly hit when Kakashi was only semi-conscious or had a mild concussion. And why certain moves worked when Garp was distracted or focused on somebody else.

Licking their wounds

Chapter 22: Licking their wounds.

Let me go Back.

Not dead. This fanfic. Is not dead, neither am I, nor will I choose to let it die after the past 2 years. I never stopped thinking about this story. What I have been doing is overthinking, a whole lot, and redrafting the entire long-term of Growth Through Chaos. The WANO arc especially changed so much in main-stream One Piece, grasping the full scope and how to work multiple skills for my version of the Straw hats+Team 7 often left them too overpowered, or underpowered, making discoveries early, and more. Following that, I really hated how my writing style formed, and it felt like paragraphs continued dragging short moments across minutes with no actual movement in the story.

Eventually, I began experimenting with writing styles and drafting different stories as a mental refresher.

What especially ignited the choice to continue this story, now, in the present, was a shock. A page has been written about "Growth Through Chaos." Thank you *ArakiGorgotAgain* , and *eruptor142* and *wootzits* , who wrote and added to the page. More are coming with more people noticing and holding an interest in the story.

Finally, the adventures continue. Some chapters are missing, from Warship Island through to Whisky Peak. Certain story-arcs were not compatible with my current plans for this story; honestly, I dragged out the Warship Island arc far too long. Now, I am re-writing it, with the entire scope of this story iron-clad all the way to Laugh Tale. With several surprises, nobody will see coming, plus a few extra's joining the Straw Hats, all the way to 2 titanic showdowns.

Major surprises are coming at every turn; watch out across the Alabasta Saga, especially on Drum Kingdom.

I am closing the vote for an extra female ninja to join the Straw hats, and the winner shall be announced in the next Chapter; with their debut on Skypeia.

Water 7 might actually divide everyone reading this story into 2 camps. Marineford is going to have more losses and higher stakes.

The rest of this story will continue to follow Cannon (more-or-less), all the way to post-Wano; where a massive shift will come, and nothing fresh from One Piece FINAL ARC will change it.

Also, I have my own theory towards where the FINAL ROAD PONEGLYPH is located in Oda's universe. This will be shared at the end of this chapter.

Now dial back the clock, kick back, and enjoy. The Straw hats are fleeing from Ennies Lobby, Kakashi has ticked everyone to depart while he stays behind, whence he experienced a decisive defeat to Monkey D. Garp, only to be saved by a stranger. The same stranger whom was watching the Going Merry until the crew came, and now have to handle things that are out of all control.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece. They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively. "Growth Through Chaos," however, is all me.

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

""Inner thoughts""=images or memories within somebody's head.

Please Read and Review, with detail.

"Old-man! Old-man! Lemee get my Old-man back!"

"Ow-dammit Luffy." Three people were wrestling with Monkey D. Luffy, trying to pin him down.

"Sensei! Sensei! Lemme go and beat that Garp guy!" Naruto kept complaining. "Don't let him make more clones, again!" Sakura exclaimed, soaking from head-to-toe with seawater.

Zoro was holding Luffy in a full nelson on his head, Sasuke wrestling with his lower half, and Sanji was mangling with wild rubber arms. All while Naruto kept thrashing his legs against Gin and Usopp's efforts to keep him on board. "We can't sail away with somebody behind," Naruto exclaimed. "The Captain and me won't do it, believe it!"

Straight after 'Kakashi' had melted, both Luffy and Naruto had run outside, and leapt overboard, while a wall of clones screened them from the crew. Without a boat and no chakra, Luffy had sunk immediately while Naruto wound up swallowed under a big wave. It'd taken Sanji, Zoro, Sasuke and Sakura to pull them back onboard, and straight away they tried leaving again.

"I'll make it this time," Naruto excused, now held airborne by his arms, one by Gin and the other getting tied to the mast by Usopp. "Rouge wave! There's a Rouge Wave off our starboard side!" Nami exclaimed. "Coming, Nami-swan!" "Cook, don't you-!" the second Sanji let go of Luffy's arms, two fists sandwiched Zoro's head. "Damn it!"

"Sanji, pull the yard arm," Gin shouted. "Sakura, the helm, starboard, 30 degrees." Far from graceful, the Merry turned to meet the oncoming wall of water, colliding with it straight on. Layers of salty seawater came washing over the deck, yet Nami kept watch on the skies and the currents. 'At least this wind for the sails is perfect,' she thought, silently.

"Got it!"" Looking back to midships, Nami found Luffy flopping over the deck with all four limbs tied in knots. Sasuke and Zoro had gotten Luffy under control. She stepped forward to ask how, then tasted seawater on her lips.

Then Sasuke ran towards Gin and Usopp, buzzing in circles around them and Nami's new brother. A moment passed then the same Uchiha dashed under Usopp's arm, and threw an axe kick that sent Naruto into the deck, so hard it left a dent, and he was out cold.

"Eh, that's a little overboard, ain' it?" Gin asked. Before Sasuke could answer, he saw white and felt his body collide with the deck. Next thing he knew, something held Sasuke up by his collar, and once his vision came back, orange hair and two brown eyes were all he could see. "~Saaa~sukeee~" Nami sang, slowly, with an unnervingly sweet smile, holding her opposite hand in a fist beside her ear, and eyes pulsing red. "~Care to share with me why you kicked my sweet little brother in his head~?" Sasuke was scared, while everyone else was inching just a little further from Nami. "Nobody strikes down my little brother without something from me," Nami was shaking him, snarling as she thrashed Sasuke back and forth. "Nobody. Nobody. Nobody."

"EHhhhh-" Sasuke couldn't answer. Until he vanished in a cloud, with Sakura in his place.

"Miss. Nami!" She spoke up, "We all know Naruto can be, a hard head. He'll be fine, and we already had fished him out once. He," she swallowed to get some feeling in her lips. "He would definitely jump overboard or untie the Captain again," Sakura pleaded.

"No longer a problem, there," Zoro called over, standing tall and staring down at the prostrate Luffy. "Out of nowhere, the moron just stopped struggling. That's how my student wound thin wire around his legs."

"Sakura's right, an' we all know it, Nami," Gin stepped forwards, closing his hand over one wrist to ease the girl down to stand on her feet. "I know but-"

"Ah-h-N-N-N-NAMI! MORE BIG WAVES!" Usopp's terror yanked everyone's attention, save the out-cold Uzumaki. Looking around, the crew grasped the rolling chaos of swells and valleys turning around them. Any of which could capsize the ship. Gin ran for the

helm and the Nami span about, barking instructions. And in the middle of it all, somebody collapsed. "Zoro, tied the anchor down, Sakura, Usopp-USOPP!" he was sprawling across the deck, with a light shade of red soaking through his bandages.

Sakura ran for her friend. Sanji got beside her and both turned Usopp on his side. "Damn, he's not in good shape," Sanji bit through his cigarette, with no sound from Sakura. "All the abuse from the execution block must have caught up with him. Sakura... Sakura!" Two fingers snapped in her face, but the Leaf Genin barely gave a flinch; her mind flashing to the last time the same friend collapsed in front of her, in Conomi Islands. Kakashi had come right after the bullet tore through the sniper's shoulder. 'But sensei isn't...'

Nami sped down, but halfway the shifting deck stole her balance... two crewmates down, one MIA, Zoro wrestling with Luffy alone, things were falling apart.

"Zoro-Sensei, use this on Luffy." Sasuke passed something else to the First-mate, then sped past Naruto's head, pulled the girls back to their feet and took Sakura by the shoulder. Both ran indoors then a moment later were back with bandage rolls. "Good. Sasuke! Bandage him," Sanji barked, "then head up for the crow's nest and call down warnings through this," gesturing to the cap on his wrist, one that all of the other nakama had a matching set. "Shouting over lightning and wind won't help here. Call through these baby den-den straight to Nami-swan. I'll deposit Usopp indoors. Nami, my lovely, get Naruto awake. I'll steer him to focus on us."

Nami answered with a nod, backing over to her new brother and not taking her eyes off Usopp until he was inside. With him deposited on a couch in the Lounge, Sanji dashed back outdoors. Right where he found Luffy flopping about on the deck bound from head-to-toe with ninja wire. 'Damn, that's handy stuff.'

Outside, Nami kept shouting orders and shot venom towards the crow's nest where Sasuke was scanning about, until Naruto woke up.

"No! No! Nami-nee. Sail us back! I'll make my sexy jutsu work this time! Then-"

"Chore-boy!" Sanji roared, looming over him. "Chore-boy, sailing is work, and nobody can work hungry."

In his mind, Naruto envisioned a silhouette overlapping with Sanji. 'Cheff Zeff?' Discipline and respect go a long way, and for the nakama Naruto had known the longest, echoing somebody they both revered...

"Get to the kitchen," Sanji barked out. "Sandwiches, onigiri, double order for all!"

Nami took his shoulders in both hands and two lost blue eyes met emotional brown ones. "Little brother." One word. "I need you, right now. We have to stay afloat through this storm. That water copy of Kakashi said he'd catch up with us straight away, remember? Please. Help me." Focused and calm, one voice came piercing through to Naruto, his face blank and with awe. Next, he swallowed and sped off into the kitchen.

Clutter and clinks of actions, plus soft ingredients plastering together, and running tap water followed, while everyone else kept the Merry steady. Nami took her spot on the balcony, multi-tasking between commands to the crew, gauging the wind and hearing intermediate updates from Sasuke. Between his Sharingan scanning observations and her own intuition, both continued sharing directions with Gin, Zoro and Sanji at the sails and helm.

Sandwiches came out, Naruto even pressing some into Sanji and Zoro's mouths with Luffy still trying to get free. The knucklehead even put his feet on the mast to deliver one to Sasuke, personally; who tasted sweet tomatoes in his. Sasuke actually blinked his appreciation, while Nami's lunch was dried duck with tangerine sauce.

"My ninja! My ninja! Zoro, let's go get my ninja. Captain's order!" The Captain continued demanding. "Luffy," the swordsman growled, holding his captain's head to the floor. "Do you see what we're in the middle of!? Kakashi never got caught before, and he'll get himself outa there, too. But now we might not be around to meet up with him at all."

The ship pitched again, throwing the bound-up devil-fruit user sideways, and head down on the floorboards. Mumbblings kept coming, incoherent until a twist brought half of Luffy's lips to open air, "-ce, Sba-... some... another guy, and me never got away. Running from Grandpa, we ran and ran and he just kept comin'. After Mean-Krieg, Rat-face and Arlong, nobody's doing nothing to my crew without me there!" Straw Hat's eye beheld small black pins in pools of white blazing fire, glaring up to his first mate; Luffy was determined. Determined to go back and take his Grandpa face-on, instead of leaving one of his crew behind.

Lightning forked over the heavens, casting a spotlight over the Going Merry. Zoro refused to admit Luffy could make him shake, answering back with his own unmoving glare while everyone else kept to their rolls.

Things continued more or less the same for the following few hours until the Merry came to a part of the sea far more calm and easy. Nami cross-checked with new sea charts they'd haggled back in Loguetown and found they were on-course away from the Loguetown. 'That storm blew us north of the regular prevailing winds. No chance of the Marines, or Luffy's scary Grandpa can follow us.'

"Zoro, throw the anchor down so everyone can rest." Ink-black clouds above made moving around slower than normal. Once a loud splash announced Zoro had thrown the anchor over, Sasuke and Sakura collapsed, Gin slid his headband off to wring it dry, and Naruto walked over beside Nami where her soft arm wove around his shoulders. Sanji found all his cigarettes too damp to enjoy a smoke, and strode into the Lounge, emerging back with Usopp. "Good thinkin'. It don't seem right takin' our eye's offa him," Gin

nodded, moving to help lay out their crewmate on the deck. "Hey, where is Naruto?" Sasuke spoke up.

"I'm right here, Sasuke," the blonde waved his hand a bit from his spot beside Nami.

"Okay. I won't state the obvious," Sanji spoke up. "So where the hell did that carnival come out from, with a grudge against us? Buggy the Clown, that seriously hot Alvida, then that executioner, Kuro something. That scuffle earlier this morning must've been to gauge us, then they sprang an ambush to draw us into a trap."

"Yeah. Where did that Mr. Pussy-foot come from, though?" Sakura asked. And Nami and Zoro were the only ones who turned.

"Awe yeah," Zoro answered. "That was all the way back before you kids and ero-cook joined up. Kuro of a Thousand PLans. We ran into him all the way back before getting this ship, just Luffy, Nami and me. He planned to raid a small village, then kill a girl." Together, the navigator and first mate shared what occurred at Syrup village with Kuro, or Klahadore, the Black Cat Pirates, and how Miss. Kaya had gifted them with the Merry. "After we beat him, Usopp came along with us, and this boat after we beat him."

"Kill her!" Sanji exclaimed. "That seedy, prickly worm gave false friendship to an unwell, innocent lady, all to murder her and ferry away with money?!" Sanji exclaimed, frozen in place despite the heat in his voice. Then he looked to the still tied-up Luffy, next he spun on his heels and walked away. "Damn it. If I don't find a dry pack of cigarettes, I might just untie the Captain and go back to make sure the bastard is dead."

"You better not," Nami answered him. "Right now, we need to decide where to sail from here," Nami reasoned, while Sasuke kept watching the Genin beside him. A watch that sent Naruto inching closer and closer to Nami.

"We wait, that's what we do," Luffy answered. Everybody pause, and some lost their breath at the captain's choice "Kakashi said he'd come, so he'll come. That's what he promised, ya know. So, we wait right here then sensei will get back with us and we get out again, believe it."

The boys began to ease their way off Luffy, and Nami took a step forward. "Luffy are you-" mid-sentence, a kunai struck Luffy in his forehead. Everyone panicked, Zoro with one hand on his sword, until 'Luffy' exploded into smoke and left empty ninja wire behind. "Hurry, Luffy hurry!" Naruto's voice rang from somewhere else on the boat. The entire crew were staring at the Naruto they could see, right as a sword came erupting through 'Naruto's' stomach.

"Naruto!" Sanji and Nami exclaimed, right as that person vanished too, leaving Sasuke holding his new sword out with a grimace. "Clones, with a transformation jutsu. He freed Luffy and they'll try to head back for Kakashi, again." Sasuke ran for the crow's nest, while the other 5/9th's of the crew had to digest that news, then split left and right about the ship; after setting Usopp down first. "What we already say, you idiots!?" Sanji called.

"We're going to rescue sensei, Sanji-senpai! Try and stop us, and I'll kick you outa the way, believe it!" That answer came from the stern, where a single lifeboat was kept. "Hm," Sanji's gambit paid off, 'he never stays quiet, at all,' and the chef tore up the stairs with Sasuke and Sakura at his heels. Zoro made a leap while Nami got her bo out and Gin slid one tonfa into his hand. "Shadow-shuriken jutsu!" Hearing it rather than seeing in the ink shade of night, a sharp buzzing became dozens and the crew dove for cover. "Paddle captain, paddle."

Sanji vaulted overboard, landing down in the boat and had to duck under a kick from Naruto. "Stopping mutinying on me, and help me go get Old Man Kakashi," Luffy complained.

"We're not Luffy. Stay here until we can plan what to do next-"

"Like Kakashi's stay and plan, and leave another crew behind?" No amount of reason could pull the uncontrollable to heel. Zoro tried to get in but landed in the water instead. Sasuke and Sakura ran over the water silently and got to Naruto first. The whole lifeboat was rocking, between 5 fighting and somebody trying to pull up to join them. Sanji kept shifting about to keep balance while Luffy went berserk, but Sanji wound up overboard. Luffy was free and threw both hands high for the mast. "I'm gonna see if he's here, and nobody stop me. Gum-gum: Rocket-!"

He took off, face-first, and straight into a round metal ball. Gin wasn't anywhere close to strong enough to stop Luffy, completely, but the impact with his weapon altered trajectories just enough that the rubber man hit the mast instead of flying over it. Nami snatched a spare yard line and then tore into a sprint for him. As Luffy slid down the mast, his butt met the deck and he fell backwards. Jogging down a stairwell in the darkness, still unlit by extra light, Nami's foot caught on something and she pitched forwards, head first.

Nami went falling over right over Luffy... down... down... closer....to where their faces met mouth-to-mouth. The scene: Luffy flat on his back, Nami's knees and hands flat on the deck, her eyes at the Captain's neck, and their lips meeting just enough that her tongue could trace over his.

A Blank, dull sense was all that somebody could feel. Hazy, calm, and devoid of thoughts, senses or dreams.

One breath broke the stillness, and everything was sore and heavy. 'Chakra exhaustion....when....ow.' Recalling how he'd gotten there, training replayed the past day's events in sharp detail. Naruto's outburst, shopping and ambushes, escapades, and a nightmare crashing through one building. 'And that was a Vice Admiral? Could do... all that? Foil or tank all my moves. Hound me better than ANBU teams. Then imprison me in...'

Reason, and sharper senses, stopped that train of thought. Kakashi flexed what muscles he could, and turned most of his joints. 'No restraints. I'm under a blanket, open to fresh air. And... sunlight.' On the edge of his scalp, one silver hair pricked at a familiar glint of heat.

He replayed the confrontation with Garp in his head. 'I kept running, through shuriken to cast a net of lightning, bound him with wire, then cast a Fire Dragon. Garp burst free, punched the dragon, and I struck with Chidori. Garp intercepted, my jutsu sputtered out, then locked me in a bear-hug, I saw the stone floor-ow.' Recalling just how hard he'd struck the ground head-first sparked a light-headed pulse through Kakashi's mind. He recalled nothing else.

'How am I here? Where is here?'

It was afternoon, a full day and a half since the Going Merry had sailed out from Loguetown. The ship was in good condition and her crew was either looking actively for distractions or managing the wayward ones aboard.

Loudly, Sasuke fell to the deck from the impact of a black he hadn't the strength to withstand. Zoro towered over him with three bokkens ready. The teacher didn't have even a drop of sweat, unlike his drenched, panting, and raw protégé. "What is a swordsman's shame?" Zoro repeated, glowering down at Sasuke.

"S-scars, on back. Either mine, or another's," Sasuke hissed, barely able to breathe. Zoro only raised his bokken, "Tora Gari!" Desperate, Sasuke stopped one sword, duct the second, but the third connected with his shoulder. Gritting his teeth from the sting, the Uchiha forced himself to stay tall on wobbling knees. "What is swordsman's shame?" Zoro repeated. Pressing his teeth together hard enough to crack one, Sasuke hissed out an answer. "Ss-scars... on the back. Either... mine or... another's." Another attack came, and Sasuke threw himself out of the way, 'My chakra is too spent for a substitution.' He kept rolling, then braced in a crouch with his weapon up.

"Scars... on the back... Mine or-chhk" coughing, Sasuke couldn't answer, trying to catch his breath.

They'd been at this since dawn after Sasuke had cleaned every centimetre of the ship with Zoro right beside him, repeating that same mantra, then chose to test said lesson through a meat grinder. Sparring with his sharingans out, Sasuke did well until running short on chakra, and was paying a painful price since.

'Am I this horrible without...' swallowing hard, on edge and near the end of his rope, Sasuke nearly swallowed air and forcibly pressed into the deck to stand back up.

"Think he'll let up at all?" Gin whispered to Nami. "After Sasuke stabbed Naruto's clone from behind? You won't see me step between them," Nami answered. The navigator kept watching casually, as Sanji came up with a tall glass on tiny sandwiches beside her.

Then a fresh rumble shook the ship, spanning a full minute until it slowly died down. A dangerously familiar phenomenon; the suffering of Luffy's empty stomach. Nami conscientiously wasn't looking at Luffy, but Gin did, where his 'Don' was tied up to the mast, biting down on his lips and only staring up high to the crow's nest.

"Usopp, can you see Old man Kakashi? Or will Nami turn about and sail back yet?" "Say yes, come, Usopp. He's here, right?" Naruto and Luffy each called up to the lookout. "Nope. No sign of him, or anyone else," the sniper answered. "Nobody else is in sight, anywhere." With that report, Naruto struggled against the ropes binding him to escape, while Luffy turned to look at Nami, "Nami? Nami?" "Nami-nee?" Both kept calling, and the girl actually hesitated at Naruto's call, but still won't look as she strode up the stairs. "Ahhh... I'm, mine trees need pruning," Nami called. "And no, we are not sailing back." Rounding a corner, alone, Nami pressed her back to a wall to catch herself. 'Wha... hhhh....what's wrong with me?' After falling over him last night, Luffy had tried to speak and his tongue met Nami's, even prodding into her mouth. Phantoms of their tongues connecting kept

dancing over Nami's own oral muscle. She could hear a dull, soft thump in one ear, and felt a touch hotter with sweat on her brow. 'What is up with me?'

Shaking it away, the girl resigned herself to follow up her excuse to escape thinking too much.

The next thing anyone knew, the Kitchen door banged open, where Sanji strode through with a plate of tea, one tray with anmitsu, umeboshi and anko dumplings with a small cup of syrup, and a massive pile of meat. Sakura didn't even look at her favourite treats as steam from the massive plate of barbeque wafted towards Luffy. The consequential rumbling generated ripples in the sea surrounding the ship

"Don, it's been days now," Gin pleaded with him. "We're an't in no good place if ya wind up like I was at th' Baratie. There ain't no reason for ya t' suffa' as Don Krieg did. Eat somethin', then we gotta choose where t' sail ta."

Sanji stepped up with the meat tray face-to-face with Luffy. "Luffy. Naruto has to stay to watch Nami-swan. So, Captain, you and I are rowing back to find Kakashi after lunch," Sanji promised him.

"Really, rea-uhmmmmfff!" With the timing of a master chef, the second Luffy's mouth got wide enough Sanji plunged a massive flank of meat inside. "Eat something right now, you idiot," he barked. "If my captain should ever die from starving, it means I failed as a cook and shouldn't have a right to live." Luffy's body had already betrayed him, gulping down the snack, including the bone. It took biting down on both lips to stop a second piece, shaking his head to refuse.

"Captain, do it. You gotta eat, come on, please?" Naruto pleaded.

But Luffy just kept twisting his head sideways, then sunk both his teeth into the wooden mast. "One of crew," he mumbled, a tad hard to hear, "ain't here. I ain't with my crew, and Old Man ran back

without me. That happened to Naruto with bastard-Krieg. Or Zoro and Usopp with Arlong. No meat for me!"

That hit the crew hard in their ways, so much that Zoro even paused mid-swing with Sasuke. The swordsman gripped his bokken so hard cracks formed in the bamboo; those in his hands and his teeth. He was trembling, and looking down, noticing Sasuke's state, the swordsman ended their session. Gin, had his own head angled to the ground, and Sanji continued arguing with Luffy's stubborn attitude.

Sasuke collapsed, his mind nearly blank with the lesson done; so much he barely caught a shadow moving over him. "I hope this lesson sunk into you, Sasuke." Nami was back, looming over the Uchiha, admonishing him. "Stabbing my little brother through his stomach on a hunch? That it might, it might, be a clone, not the real one." Sasuke looked up to meet her glaring eyes and Zoro's mantra playing in his head; they left a new and strange taste in Sasuke's mouth: shame. "Yes, Nami. I had options," he admitted. "Unless there isn't a second choice, I won't strike another in the back, again."

"We'll find out if you remember, tomorrow," Zoro barked. "And officially, this crew has a fresh rule." Turning around, the swordsman glanced across everybody, then motioned towards Naruto and Nami. "Only Nami gets to knock around Naruto if he does anything knuckleheaded. And if we wind up in a pinch, throw the kid at whoever's dumb enough to fight us. The Sea-witch, she'll just tear'em apart."

"What the hell d'you just say?!" Sanji flew straight for Zoro, leaving the plate of barbeque on the ground. "Nami-swan is a goddess, not some witch!"

"She's my Nami, Sanji-senpai! My Nami-nee!" Naruto called out. "Lemme down, I gotta kick Zoro too, believe it!"

"What ae you thinking, Naruto?" Sasuke snarled at him. "Zoro-san out-ranks Sanji. And...." Sasuke was pressing his lips together, then

both his eyes darted left and right. 'She really is, terrifying, after smacking Sanji to the ground for saving her from that pirate, Alvida.' *Naruto stood over his foe: Alvida was sprawling on the ground, with tears and gashes all over her form, coloured with blood, and her pretty face under Naruto's foot.*

'How did the dobe cut her,' Sasuke grit his teeth at the memory, 'but neither Zoro or I could?'

"Nami-nee's only scary when she's gotta be," Naruto complained. "And if Sanji-senpai keeps flirting with her, no more sexy jutsu, believe it!"

That threat stopped Sanji cold, and a haymaker from Zoro floored him. While Nami's ears pricked. "Oh, ~about that~." Naruto felt a shadow engulf him. Glancing where the warm sun had been shining, it was obscured by his big sister. Both her arms crossed under her chest and fixed a certain look over him. "That reminds me, of something you and I need to clear with you, Naruto. About use for that 'sexy jutsu?'"

With Naruto taking his turn to be scared, Sasuke went limping towards the mast and Sakura. Sinking down in a chair, he took one of the roast flanks and had a big bite. He got to enjoy a meal and a show: Nami setting down ground rules and more into Naruto, while Sanji and Zoro kept bashing feet, bokken and skulls together.

With a sigh, the episode between Zoro and Sanji ended when somebody else got between them. "Enough o' that," Gin hissed. "We still gotta figure where and what to go from 'ere. Sasuke, Sakura an' Naruto." Addressing all three, Gin lowered his weapons as Zoro sheathed his, and Sanji tapped one foot to the deck. "I got me no doubt Kakashi'd slipped outa th' gasp o' anybody. Even the Hero 'imself, Garp th' Fist. An' you three know 'im longest anyone 'ere. Ain't there anything Kakashi'd install in ya' if in you ever had nt' separate? Or a place know only t' you four, to rendezvous at?"

. "No. We have none" Sakura answered him, after thinking for several minutes. "None of us made any plans, or anything so far back as the Baratie. Most ninjas would, and use them in their training, but all of us still are just Genin."

"I never thought about such plans if we'd separated while writing up sea plans, either." She continued, bemoaning.

"Aw'right," Gin answered, pondering. "What about..."

"Buda-buda-buda.....buda-buda-buda..." On his wrist, Gin found the baby den-den ringing; a sound which cut through Zoro and Sanji's scuffle. Looking around, all of them noticed something, and Gin snapped his awake.

"Kakashi? Is tha' you?" Hopeful, as nobody on deck had their own open, the crew held their breath. "Darn it. No." Usopp's voice answered.

The crew looked up, where the sniper dejectively waved down. "I thought I'd try this. See if Kakashi was close enough to hear it ring," he bitterly explained. "Guess I should have said something first to you all."

"Usopp!" Sanji exclaimed. His head snapped about, gazing between the snail, to the one on his own wrist, then back again. "Of course!" Nami's voice called over, the girl running from her tress, straight to the lounge and nearly everyone else followed. Inside, Nami had one pen in hand, jotting down a single number, then threw it down and made a dash to one corner, where the adult den-den mushi they'd purchased was sleeping.

"I should have thought of this sooner! Sanji, try this number," Nami held out a single paper slip to the cook. "Yes, my darling." Taking it, Sanji dialled up the signal and everyone whom could move converged on them.

"Can those snails call Kakashi's snail directly?" Usopp asked, so rapidly only Sanji caught the message.

"I'm afraid not," Sanji answered. "Our miniature ones can only make short-range contact. And they're on a pretty tight connection, one this bigger snail can't tap into. But if Kakashi could sneak in and out of Arlong Park, and half the stories we've heard about ninjas are correct-"

"They are," Sasuke cut him off. "But we don't have any means to set up a rendezvous location in a permanent spot. Anyone you call would be a waste of time."

"Wrong." Nami answered him. "Kakashi is smart, reasonable, and resourceful. So if he can't find where we are, or figure where we'd travel towards, he can sail back somewhere we all used to be," she reasoned. "The number I wrote down was for Arlong's old snail; the one Genzo and Nojiko used to call the Navy after we crushed him at Arlong Park."

"The Baratie!" Sakura exclaimed. "Sanji, call there next and warn Chef Zeff. And ask him which island Hanma Village is on."

"Hey, hey, what are you all doing?" Naruto from the outside, cut off from the decision-making. Zoro strode for the doorway and outside explained their reasoning to the pair of knuckleheads. "But those or just places we were. Why would Kakashi-sensei go back there, and not just sail somewhere else?" Luffy whinned. "Grand might even hear we were around those spots and sail there to get me. We gotta find him and beat 'em up to get Old Man Kakashi back."

Zoro sighed, but the seed of that possibility started to present some, disturbing possibilities.

"Buda-buda-buda-buda... - Buda-buda- buda-buda..."

Nami and Sanji carried the snail outside to one table where Sakura had been sitting at. "Buda-buda..buda-bu-click. Hello? This is

Cocoyoshi Village. Genzo speaking."

"Genzo."

"Nami? Hey Nojiko. Nami's got her own den-den mushi." "Nami? How's it going sis?"

Nami took the caller dial from Sanji to update her family on what happened.

"You were chased by Hero of the Navy!?" the snail exclaimed, with Genzo's voice.

"We got away," Nami answered the anxious message. "And it turns out, he was there because his name is Monkey D. Garp. Think about that a moment, and with Luffy."

The snail stayed silent, despite it's mouth gaping open, and stayed that way for so long, Nami had to call into the dial twice to get a reaction. "Are they father and son!?" Genzo exclaimed. "Damn! That actually makes him defeating Arlong totally sensible."

"Grandfather and Grandson," Namim explained. "And he wanted to drag Luffy away to be a Marine, not a pirate. Kakashi chose to lead him in another direction, but we had to sail away. But we don't have a solid place to reunite with him."

"Does this... Grandpa, know about what you did here? Or... you're thinking Kakashi might travel back to the Conomi islands and contact us," Nojiko grasped. "If he shows up, can you record our contact number?" Nami asked. "Hey! Hey Nojiko? You doing okay there, big sister?" Naruto called over to the snail. "Little brother, please, wait just one moment," Nami pleaded. "Little brother?/Big sister?" Somehow, two voices came through the snail, simultaneously. "Nami who are you talking to? And why did he call me...?" The question went unasked, and it didn't have to be finished.

"Nami," Gin spoke up. "I'm followin' yah. There's plen'y of islands near th' way int' th' Grand Line. I'll look'em ovah, find one we can make for, an' wait 'till word on Kakashi comes. Move th' table near Naruto, then lets send th' same request t' Zeff at th' Restaurant."

"Do it." Zoro spoke up, with both arms crossed and leaning against the hull. "Nami, make this quick, but nobody unties Naruto. Then ero-cook can message that wild-foot Zeff." "he's called red-foot Zeff, moss-head," Sanji called to him, using Zeff's actual name; something Sakura and Sasuke did not miss.

For 20 minutes, Nami relayed everything over the snail that she knew about Naruto, who also chipped in and spoke about his childhood. Neither heard Genzo, and Nojiko would interrupt only with token questions. By the end, Naruto officially had two older sisters, creating a warm moment... until details about his escape attempts and a certain sexy jutsu brought out three chastising attitudes.

"YOU MIGHT GIVE NAMI SOME IDEAS!" Genzo berrated into the snail. "I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH BELLEMERE WOULD FIND THAT AMUSING. YOU GO STRIPPING LEFT AND RIGHT AND THERE'LL BE MORE PERVERTS THAN BOUNTY HUNTERS AFTER YOU!" Nojiko was a bit more gentle, and both sisters extracted a certain promise from Naruto.

Meanwhile, Gin and Sakura put together a list of islands they could sail for. "There ain't no spot with a harbour closer t' Reverse Mountain than Loguetown. Yet there are a chain a' spots t' th' south. We can some rock that outa th' way, one with nobody else livin' there, or a village that ain't got no Marines in it, an' wait."

"You hear that, Genzo?" Nami asked. "We both do, Nami," the man's voice answered. "A Marine captain already came here to collect Arlong and his garbage. We're all rebuilding Gosa Village, and life here is... wonderful."

"Straw Hat. If you can hear this, thank you," Genzo heartfully expressed. "All of you. And Naruto. Nami. Both of you take care of

each other. We'll keep a watch by the coastline for Kakashi."

"Thank you," Nami nodded, then hung up the snail and swapped places with Sanji. While he waited for somebody to pick up at the Baratie, the Merry caught a light breeze as the crew angled the sails and rudder to travel southwards. Nami peered over the charts to ID options Gin and Sakura had selected.

"Hello and welcome? You are calling the Baratie. Lookin' for a reservation, ya lazy bum?" Sanji actually cracked a grin at the snail's greeting. "You never change, Patty. Listen, I've run into some trouble, the whole crew has, and Kakashi is missing from us."

"Sanji?! Hey Zeff, I got Sanji here on the phone." Greeting passed between the ex-sous chef and his father figure, who also demanded to speak with Sasuke, Naruto and Sakura, and got worried when he heard Kakashi wasn't there. "THE Monkey D. Garp! YOU LOT WOUND-UP DEAD TO RIGHTS WITH THE HERO FROM ALL THE WAY BACK WHEN?"

"WHAT SORTA UNLUCKY STARS SET YOU LOT COLLIDING WITH HIM!" Chef Zeff's roar made three out of four of his ex-employees freeze. Sanji was unbothered, and immediately elucidated everything which developed at Loguetown.

"Hmmmmmm. The devil sure likes to zig-zag his luck with you lot," the snail relayed in Zeff's tone, plus a familiar rhythm of one bouncing moustache. "And you're thinkin' Kakashi might retreat back here if he got away. I'll watch for'im. Tarm doesn't have his own transponder snail, but I know somebody nearby his lot. They'll send him the same request should Kakashi appear there." The Chef then forced all of his ex-employees to pledge they'd look after each other but refused to hang up the line; and neither would Sanji, for longer, and longer, both blaming the other for not being man enough to hang up.

Kakashi was improving, testing control of himself again, able to listen and open his eye when he wished to. Another sense, from his nose,

was actively testing the scents around him. 'Sea air....musk, and weathered wood. Like on the Baratie...'

"If I wished to imprison you, I'd have used shackles by now." His company announced.

"You are awake, sufficient to hear me. I know." The figure continued, while Kakashi continued putting on airs that he was out of it. "My aims are to reunite you with Luffy," the gravelly voice unveiled. Resigned, the Jonin opened his own eye, and tried sitting up. He made it halfway, fell backwards, hard, and look about to find his keeper.

In their vessel, one smaller than the boat Sanji had kept at the Baratie, both men were separated by less than two metres. The unknown one was clad in an ink-green cloak with his head exposed. Kakashi could see he was a large figure, with black hair in window's-peak, a thick forehead creating sinister eyes, and one very distinctive tattoo: diamonds, patterned horizontally down the side of his face with a red, ochre shade. 'Dragon-san?' Kakashi recalled, from a memory. *"Some speak of me as a Dragon. And I will share my past if you do the same."* Silence ensued, with Kakashi lazing about a smidge; easy and ready to end this man life, or try to. *"Well then, Dragon-san, thank you. Let's lend the other two some help."*

"How, did I wind up here?" Kakashi enquired. His host did not reply, immediately. Instead looking ahead somewhere beyond the boat's edge, staring while the winds about them picked up.

"Over my shoulder, and with a little negotiation," a blunt answer came. "Your ship and those aboard escaped from Loguetown and did not return. Wisely," the stranger replied. "It appears fate is steering man to cross another's course. We have company, ahead."

Kakashi itched to stand but couldn't do more than drag half his body upright. 'This feels worse than after I had to fight Zabuza. No surprise why. if I can't stand, then smell.' tilting his nose in the air,

Kakashi sorted through familiar scents until a fresh invader lent a few hints. 'a person....a girl, and she is alone.'

Minutes later and those inside the small boat grew from two to three, or two-and-a-half. A girl was sleeping, clad in a thick yellow dress, a maroon sash, and blonde hair tucked into a tall white hat. "Her boat was half-flooded." The large man was handling her with a gentle touch that Kakashi took sharp note of. "Few who have not sailed before could have remained afloat through a storm lasting days," Dragon elucidated.

"It took that long before you could stir."

Kakashi actually did stir at the news he'd been out for entire days. While his company continued staring at the child. "She holds a strong will, with fate on her side. As do you."

Listing, Kakashi couldn't make anything out about his host. And that set him on edge. 'I should play along,' he chose. "Perhaps she became thrown overboard," the Jonin proposed. "Or an adult she was with fell and she was left alone, Dragon."

"So you do recall what I am called," the stranger replied. "That theory is doubtful, however. The dinghy is a Marine-issue vessel. She's underfed, and carries this." His fingers were moving down to her neck. Kakashi didn't move, as he'd noticed the thick string under the clothing folds, watching until a tiny and thick hook, tied secure around the loop, appear in the man's fingers.

Silence ensued. 'He knows what this is,' Kakashi thought. 'Something of value? Was she abducted, then escaped without fresh water or food, nor a means to contact?... contact.'

"Do not bother." Kakashi's companion spoke aloud. "That snail on your wrist can be intercepted by any whom may be listening. Back-den-den mushi, a distinct species, can tap in between any when they are awake. Eavesdroppers favour them, and should any be in range, you risk revealing yourself and Luffy to the Marines."

"Actually, I was hoping for salt-broiled saury," Kakashi answer him, his head cocked and smiling with his one eye. "I've heard of a wonderful restaurant where you can sail in and out of. No need for either tides or a dock. Think we can call there and place an order under..."

"I'm so sorry," Kakashi shook his head, putting on an air of embarrassment. "Here we are, a full day, and not even sharing our names. The same air, the same boat, and the same worries, and no clue of one another."

The larger man turned his full attention to Kakashi, with a wild grin that invoked multiple shivers down the Hatake, from his fingers and toes, along his spine and deep in his soul. "Such a reservation would be under the name Monkey D. Dragon."

.....too many. Too many shocks, and random or radical events had happened to Kakashi within only 1 week. And all from members of a certain family. He was utterly silent, able to sound only a croak to indicate he was even conscious.

"I negotiated with my own father, for us to evade with no pursuit.," Dragon continued. "I am not part of the Navy, nor any whom follow the World Government. And neither my father nor I desire to burry or flood islands by shattering them apart amidst a battle between us."

Setting the girl aside, Dragon's gaze filled Kakashi's vision. "Few in this world can grasp the true value that a victory through distractions can hold," Dragon impressed on him. "And against the infamous Hero no less. I admire the humility you carry, Hatake Kakashi. And once you join your own crew once more, know I would gladly extend my hand to invite you to follow me, should in future the desire should seize you."

"For now, ride the winds of change with Luffy. With a will such as his, and a little luck. I shudder to imagine all that you shall accomplish and witness, together."

Silence followed, with the edges of Dragon's lips twitching to betray his opinions. Until Kakashi seized his wits back, enough to fix his mask as Dragon's attention shifted down to their company.

"I would ask that you return her," Dragon spoke up, gesturing down at the girl. "To the home she was taken from. For now, we are following the Going Merry. As I attached something inside the hull whilst you all were away."

"And what something is that?" Kakashi asked, carrying an ice edge with his voice. Grinning, in a way that strung a sharp echo in Kakashi's mind, the man raised one open palm, with a square of paper moving to one side.

Mid-afternoon found the Straw Hat crew sailing southwards at Nami's directions in line with their plan. Gin, Sanji and Sakura were handling the ship, while Sasuke was learning had to keep and maintain Kazuko Shugo under Zoro's watchful eye. Luffy and Naruto were still tied to the mast. The only one not present with everyone else was Usopp; down in his workshop, tinkering.

He'd tried to sleep, but upon closing both eyes something kept nagging him awake and forcing sleep brought images of the Lougetown plaza to his eyes; Kuro's glares, Luffy before him, running about, then a blank until the crew were fighting between Luffy and Naruto and keeping their ship afloat in the storm.

He'd given up on sleeping and the bandages around his legs and arms courtesy of Captain Kuro made everything a little harder. '5 minutes. then I'll try the transponder snail again,' he decided. 'Kakashi did said he'd catch up with us, but he might have Marines straight on his, and who better the chase'em off than the mighty captain Usopp?' His leg twitched, the one with bandages as flashes from certain memories came up: *Five blades pierced the Sniper's leg, his pain announced to everybody there, civilians frozen in place or backing off where they could. Kuro drew his cat claws free as the fight continued around Usopp, until somebody snatched him away.'*

'Good thing Luffy beat Kuro before I get serious. Hh, yeah, I'd have paid him back myself, sure, for a lot after he hurt Kaya. And all the time he'd chase me away....' The shaking was now at Usopp's arm, joining with sweat building on his brow, threatening to spill a new concoction.

Jango stood looming with Kaya, Carrot, Pepper and Onion. "Special Attack: Exploding Star!" 'Yeah. I... I saved my home town. I've been in plenty of fights after all. Heh, we wouldn't have a ship if I wasn't. The Great Captain Usopp could never leave a man behind. " I don't get it... because I am afraid... I am not really here." Water droplets spilt on the floor beneath "Kakashi." Luffy's knees buckled under him, the Devil-fruit user somehow suddenly drained of any energy he had. "If any of you turn back," "Kakashi" kept talking looking over the occupants of the room. '

"But... a man... this time... did, stay....behind." The sniper, the coward, and the liar was thinking aloud, reality sinking through his mind. Usopp didn't notice his face curling into one shoulder, folding both arms around his chest; trying to smoothen his insecurities.

"Usopp! You asleep?"

"Oh. Not anymore, but I feel great, heck, I could go another all night and still fight on a day of endless morning." Zoro was at the hatch near the ladder down into the room, a welcome distraction for Usopp. "Ero-cook called out for dinner. Luffy's still tied to the mast and saying no to anything we can't force him to swallow. A calm dinner ain't something to miss on this ship."

Usopp sat there with his mouth hanging open. Then literally dropped what was in his hands so fast, the powders mixed together in a reaction that burnt his pants. 2 minutes, a change of clothes and leaves port-holes open to let the reek of sulphur leave the room, and both men were at a peaceful dinner with their crew.

A sombre mood hung between them, especially with fatigue creeping over the young pirate crew. Sanji had already tried feeding their

captain again, but that contest he lost by a wide margin; their captain refusing the same tricks twice, his mouth tightly shut even no matter what promises or kicks came.

By the time the inky shade of night had descended, the crew drew straws for the night shift: Zoro and Usopp. "I'll take-"

"No, let me." Usopp cut-off Sasuke. "The mighty captain Usopp knows no fatigue, and can go whole days without sleep!" Smiling at them, the sight of Usopp's usual self displayed any attitude to his blatant lies, and everyone else went to bed.

Naruto and Luffy were snoring side-by-side at the mast, The First-mate stood at the railing, silence and darkness lending a moment to think of the present, and back over so many events, of the past 2 days. 'Garp. A Navy Vice-Admiral and he kept thrashing Luffy, Kakashi and me. I didn't fight him, but I won't fool myself to think I wouldn't lose. And I swore to Luffy that I'd never lose again, not ever.' Gritting his teeth, his inner fire had Zoro's limbs vibrating, the compulsion to stop off for his weights.

Usopp was at the bow, the setting invoking a similar toll of him, until he tried to watch the darkness for some sign of new company.

"Kakashi, ~Kakashi, ~come back home Kakashi~.... Kakashi, ~Kakashi- ~come back home Kakashi~... Kakashi~"

"Nice tune." Zoro's voice cut the melody, or lack of it, and the sniper's head jerked in a double-take at the massive load Zoro held.

"He-he-hey, are you really still training after all that happened today?" At the question, Zoro gazed down with an eyebrow cocked. "That's a foolish question, Usopp. I train every day. But, after Luffy's crazy Grandpa harried us outa town..." the swordsman fell silent for a couple heartbeats. "That man can fight on the level the King of the Pirates had. Like Mihawk, he's been in and out of the Grand Line so much, and against him, even Luffy could only run away." Looking back, the pair spied Luffy and Naruto still asleep. "For this crew, for

my captain, and for the promise I made... all of those promises. I need to grow stronger."

In his mind, words Zoro shared with his rival, and his disciple echoed in equal measure.

"One day one of us will be the world's greater swordsman!"

"Until the day comes that I can take his title! I... will never... never be defeated again! Is that ok, King of the Pirates!"

"So long as you're here with us. I will train you unrelentingly and ensure you will have the skill and the strength to destroy that man the next time you meet!"

"Anyway," now with his mind on the present, Zoro glance back and motioned towards the middle of the deck. "I can't afford to be weak. Not measured against them. So everyone waking moment, I gotta spend it well. I'll be in that clear space behind Nami's trees at the stern." Turning about, Zoro hauled his load away. "Watch out everywhere else, and call if something comes outa nowhere."

Moving further away, Zoro perked one ear as he passed the snoring Luffy and Naruto. Then up the stairs, around the trees, to the stern of the Merry, where he dropped into push-ups with the weights on his back.

Usopp hadn't even watched him go. Nor was he looking anywhere else as a pair of words echoed in his mind. 'Weak... Weak... Weak... Weak... Weak... Weak...' Usopp was shaking, from strands of hair down to each of his toes. 'Am I weak? Huh. What-what kinda thought is that? I'm a pirate. A real, cunning, strong and glorious pirate. After all, Captain Usopp was the one who smote the wretched Krieg Pirates.'... Naruto was on the ground, coughing violently from a face pale with a sickly blue tint. "Little bro!" Yosaku and Johnny exclaimed, rushing forward to help. Sanji was straight behind them while Usopp only watched.'

'But I've been in plenty of fights. Heh, we wouldn't have a ship if I wasn't. The Arlong Pirates, and their black-heart patsy's learned that.'....in a forest, Captain Nazumi had a pistol levelled towards Sakura and Nojiko, while Usopp readied his sling-shot. "You imbecilic, bitch!" Nazumi shrieked. A loud bang tore through the scene, and Nojiko's form collapsed. She tumbled back to the ground, gasping "Na... mi." Nazumi merely huffed at the effort. "I told you I was feeling frustrated," he admonished them. "Still, one more, for good measure."

"No!" Usopp dove in front of Nojiko, positioning himself between her and the Rat. "Special atta-" Before he could fire, a pistol fired, sending a hammering impact through Usopp's chest, tearing into a lung, with a searing hot jolt Usopp's voice died in his throat under a horrible, crippling pain.

'I... I... I did... noth-?' Within Usopp's mind, denial was a war with his conscious. And another memory, the most recent, forced its way to the forefront.

'Five blades pierced the Sniper's leg, his pain announced to everybody there, civilians frozen in place or backing off where they could. Kuro drew his cat claws free as the fight continued around Usopp, until somebody snatched him away.'

'I got caught... He ambushed me, and I couldn't do anything. Not there, not like when I struck him with my exploding star. At, the, moment...'

Far up on the scaffolding, Usopp was all alone. The rain soothed his leg somewhat while his spirit sank deeper into certain thoughts. Swallowing hard at a lump of iron in his throat, Usopp tasted salt on his damp cheek. "Please! My friends! Rescue me!" He pleaded to the heavens.' Which led to Luffy and Kakashi....in the centre of the Loguetown execution stand, everybody watched two men up on top. Luffy raised his head: smiling to the world: "Sorry. I'm Dead."

'That, this... in my stories, this never happened in any story before,' Usopp confessed. 'Real life is way more dangerous than my old tall tales. But I thought I knew that coming here. There's so much more danger out here, and you either gotta have some big powers, strength no human should have or be meaner than the bad guys to live.'

"Should I even be here at all?" That came out aloud, not inside the tormenting confines of Usopp's head.

"What? What kinda question is that?" With a turn, Zoro's voice pulled Usopp to look right up at him. The sniper hadn't grasped that he'd sunken to his knees, even his satchel and tools spilt over the floor.

"Why are you asking that question, Usopp?" Starring up, usopp couldn't see his crewmate, and he locked two hands over his mouth. 'I said that out loud? No, no, no,'

Usopp kept repeating that mental manta, as Zoro came around a corner, shirtless and with his muscles visibly taunt in what little light the moon provided.

"Usopp?" the first mate enquired. "You feel, or think that you're weak?"

Denial came bubbling up in the sniper's throat and quickly mixed with bile that sent Usopp into a coughing fit. Staring at Zoro's boots, Usopp sucked in a deep breath, then started up with tears in his eyes.

"Yes," he squeaked. "Yes. yes, because I am. Because I know I'm the cause that Luffy almost died, and Kakashi had to stay back. Because I got caught by Kuro. Zoro I beat Kuro back home, with my exploding star. But then he came back and trounced me with one move." Usopp was moaning now, until he had to stop short and breathe, past tears of shame pouring down his face.

Silence reigned between him and Zoro, Usopp refused to look in the eye, hanging his head low, churning in a pool of pity and misery.

"You... all.....I'll..." Shuffling, Usopp stood again, letting more of his things spill out around him on the deck: tacks, his hammer, lead stars, tobasco stars, exploding stars, a small slingshot, rubber bands, and more. "Zoro. I'm weak. Way too weak to be with Luffy-"

"Hey." Glaring, Zoro hefted Usopp to his eye level, high enough the boy's toes couldn't brush the ground. "Do you think leaving is what anybody wants? You think if you up and leave this crew, Luffy won't go on a bigger hunger strike until you come back?"

Usopp had no response, but those words at least made him stop crying.

"You think running away and avoiding something you're not cut for, is a good thing?" Zoro continued. "That's what the despicable cowards do, like that one who tried killing your girlfriend, you, and Luffy."

"You got ambushed by Kuro. He did that because you beat him in a straight fight. And I'll wack you over your head until that sink's in. You hear me?" Zoro impressed on the boy, then let him stand on his own feet

"Okay. You're weak. And you lost a fight. Badly." Zoro folded both arms, while Usopp grew more downcast "Like I did when Mihawk cut me down? Like Gin was, coming back from the Grand Line, broken and terrified?"

"Listen," Zoro continued, sucking in a deep breath. "We're in the middle of the sea, and we gotta depend on one another. That's been true since you and I met, and it'll grow even more when we reach the Grand Line. I'm going there, so I can get strong, so I can challenge Mihawk again. I'm going there too so I can get Sasuke to be strong," the swordsman continued. "Strong enough to kill the guy who massacred his clan. And I made a promise to Luffy, too. To see him become the King of the Pirates. I failed in that."

Now Usopp was shocked, his head moving so rapidly, the boy lost his balance and fell backwards. "When Luffy met me," Zoro continued, "he said that the King of the Pirates can't have anything less than the best on his crew. I met the best, and I lost. Do you see me giving up and leaving this crew?"

Usopp had been there, and thinking back, he recalled Zoro's words about never losing again. "Is Gin running away from our crew?" Zoro pressed on. "You were there when Luffy made him part of our crew, right? He came out from the Grand Line broken, and now is going back into that nightmare with all of us."

"Ah... Ah was only there fer a short time. Ah saw things Ah can' help but feel are beyond meh. Bu' after seeing you, Don Luffy. Ah wanna sail on th' Grand Line again." That example stuck out in Usopp's head.

"If you only leave us, because you believe you failed and want to run away from that, it's not selfless, it's selfish. And against everything Kakashi stayed behind to save us from."

"So-so-so-so-so-so, wh-what can I do?" Usopp stammered out. "I... I just... I came with you..." finally he remembered. "I came because, I wanna be a brave warrior of the seas." Zoro just kept watching, as Usopp choked on the memory, then looked around the ship. In the end, his eyes came to a stop, and following them zoro discovered he was staring at Luffy.

"We're friends right. So come on." Luffy.'

'I... I came here, because Luffy asked me to. But still, If I'm not strong enough to face danger and survive..'

"There is a real chance we will encounter more dangers in the future, and our goals will be only to survive."

Ussop caught a fresh idea when he recalled what somebody else spoke to three students. Though he hadn't answered Zoro, the

swordsman could tell Usopp was thinking instead of wallowing in depression, and just continued waiting, patiently.

'Kakashi did say to Sasuke, Sakura and Naruto they all need to grow stronger, and to focus on how to survive. And to be a part of that. He asked me to help them, with my shooting.' That realization lend a layer of confidence to the sniper, recalling what he was good at.

'What else did he say that day? "Now, each of you have different skills, and I understand now that you have your own style of learning; or one method of it that works better than others do."'

"Zoro." Usopp spoke aloud, gathering himself back up, with his head hung low. "Thanks. I am weak. But I'm... I'm not leaving this crew." Slowly, the sniper faced his first mate eye-to-eye. "You're right. I was a coward, but I won't take that coward's path. Not now, not ever." Zoro nodded at that, then gestured back to where he'd been at the stern.

"Teaching Sasuke got me thinking about a few things. You wanna come back and get strong with me?"

"Uh-uh! No-no-no-no-no! I ain't one-ah you superhuman freaks!" Usopp panicky exclaimed. "Alright," Zoro just shrugged, turning on his heels to walk away. Usopp didn't relax until after the swordsman was no longer in sight, then wiped sweat off his brow. 'Phwww. Close one. Maybe I could do some strength, but not anything that'll break every bone in my body.'

'Okay. Pulling one hand to rub his chin, Usopp sat with his legs crossed, then immediately leapt up, howling, at something sharp punctured his pants.

"Usopp!?" "I'm okay," the sniper answered, rubbing his painful left rump. "I just sat on one of the tacks that fell out of my pocket."

'Hey!' Staring down at it, gears in Usopp's mind started working. 'One of those in somebody's foot, or leg, they'd stop dead in their

tracks. Or, could I send dozens of them in a shower, like the new shuriken move Naruto has?'

'It'll be one way to fight. But my goal is to get stronger. Should I look for a devil fruit, then? Sakura got a big book all about them. And having two on this crew might do us a lota good, especially with Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura's water-walking removing how I'd basically be an anchor.'

Pulling out one notebook, and gathering the rest of his supplies, tools and weapons, Usopp started jotting a list down and muttering over ideas.

'Devil fruit? That'll depend on a lot a luck just finding one nobody's munched into. What about if I had another weapon? Zoro and Sasuke both have swords. Kakashi... before we had to run, he got a lot of good weapons like wire and shuriken. GIn and Sakura both have tonfa's for close-range fighting. Nami had her long stick, too. That and, feminine wiles, plus her scary temper. And Sanji...'

Usopp recalled Sanji teaching Naruto how to use black-leg style in between Cocoyashi village and Loguetown. 'Could I learn that?'

The rest of the evening passed in silence, until Zoro fell asleep between 4am-7am, par normal. And the glorious light of a new day broke across the East Blue. Everyone else came up, with Sanji the first into the kitchen and Usopp was there to meet him. "Listen, uh, Sanji? I... I wanna ask you about something."

Both boys kept chatting while Sanji was dicing fruit, tomatoes and potatoes for breakfast. "You want to learn how to use kicks from me. instead of getting stronger with Zoro?" The cook was serious, watching Usopp's throat clench before nodding yes. "Smart," Sanji answered. "Getting strong and getting able to fight are not the same thing. Plus, thanks to Zeff and Kakashi," Sanji's breath hitched at just saying their missing nakama's name, especially since he'd known Kakashi the longest after the Cabin-Genin. "Between training the

kids with those two, I am a better instructor than moss-head. Let's start after breakfast."

Next, the girls came into the kitchen, fresh and wearing new clothes from their last shopping trip: Sakura in bright red shorts and a white shoulder-sleeve shirt, plus her headband resting on her forehead instead of behind it. Nami was in blue booty shorts, a navy tank top with pale blue hearts patterned along it. Everyone had breakfast outside once the wind picked up, cruising them further south, and someone especially was smirking towards his teammate.

"You're happy about this, Sasuke?" Naruto shouted, still tied up to the mast with Luffy beside him. The Uchiha was wearing a white collared t-shirt, forest-green pants and a black belt across his chest to keep Kazoku Shugo sheathed on his back.

"Hm," the Uchiha smirked, swallowing one mouthful. "Just recalling the last time one of us were left tied up." Both his teammates thought back to somebody bound to a pole. "You mean the Bell test?" Sakura asked. "After Naruto tried stealing lunch and we had to feed him?"

"A bell test? What an' why is that?" Gin asked as Nami cocked her head over to listen.

"No." Sasuke denied towards Sakura. "Before that, straight after we got assigned to Team Seven." He was glaring at Naruto, with smug payback too sincere to be fake. "Naruto ambushed me in a room, failed, then several clones popped out of nowhere. They overpowered me, left me tied up and gagged, all while he used a transformation jutsu to appear like me and left through a window." Now Naruto remembered, and of talking with Sakura while under a transformation of Sasuke.

Most of the crew couldn't decide if they found that disappointing or funny. Sakura even had to fight a glare towards Naruto, recalling her promise to not hurt him after the revelation in Loguetown.

But then-"Sasuke?... That happened the day of our team assignments?" Sakura inquired, bewilderedly "When?"

"Straight after we left the academy," Sasuke answered.

"That can't be true," Sakura declared. "I met Naruto right after that..and I, I left him and stomped off to find you."

"You met me on a bench, remember? I closed my eyes and..." Blushing at that memory, practically a lifetime ago as opposed to mere months, Sakura's gaze went to the floor, missing the two different faces the boys made. "I thought you were kissing me. But you ran off with arms wrapped around your stomach. Then I ran into you again and I, I kept talking about Naruto." Recalling what they'd spoken about, guilt flaring up again made Sakura silent. 'I really saw Naruto as carefree and lucky, because he had no family. Was, yeah, he must have been hurting all the way back then. Sasuke told me off, said I was annoying, and he was right. Sensei even said I hurt him. And Naruto would misbehave to get attention, maybe even transform into Sasuke and-.....wait... ambush... transformation....Sasuke was tied-up?'

"Ambush....transformation... Sasuke was tied-up?" Sakura thought aloud, while in the background Naruto's head spun around, terrified. "Tied up, turned into....Ambushed... transformation... Sasuke was tied up...?" The girl shot up to her feet, her head trembling as random pieces fell back together.

"Hold it," Usopp cut in on Sakura's musings. "If Sasuke was tied up. And he's happy seeing Naruto like this now. But Sakura found Sasuke at the same time all the way back then? Sakura, what happened when you next saw Naruto?"

"Right after Sasuke said I was annoying, like Naruto," Sakura answered. "I tried to be nice to him next, when he came up to me next. But he turned around and ran after Sasuke, saying he wanted to fight. But Naruto doubled over himself and sped away, holding your stomach. Just like before..." A poignant pause hung in the air,

and somebody was looking left and right to escape. "Just like Sasuke, just as I went to kiss... to kiss....!" Sakura kept thinking aloud, drawing in the crew's attention. Everyone, save Luffy, turned their heads towards Naruto.

"Huh... ahhhh... errr, no, what you mean, Sasuke?" Naruto was sweating, from his place in the spotlight. "That wasn't me, I, I, ahhhhh, ir-Iruka!" Naruto's trademark grin was out and kept nodding his head. " Yeah-yeah-yeah, I was still at the Academy with Iruka-sensei. Then kept running for bathroom over and over that day. My stomach took some real bad times to-"

"THAT WAS YOU!" A cannonball could have hit the Merry with a gentler impact, and safer than Sakura exploding. "Who was what?" Luffy asked. While Zoro didn't look like he'd clued in either. but everyone else, including Sanji and Nami had caught on.

"Naru... to. "/"Little brother," Sanji and Nami were fixing Naruto with death glares. "Did you....sneak around....as somebody else....to try stealing kisses from people they meant to give the real being?" Nami was digesting this news with a shrinking sense of patience.

Worse; behind her, Sanji wore a face of disgust all his own. "Do you need a lesson- No, sorry, get ready for a hard lesson right now, imitator. Nobody, anybody, should ever-"

"NARUTOOOOOOOO!"

"Usopp, are you sure you still want to do this?"

It was mid-day, and the sniper appeared half-dead, sprawled over the ground spread-eagle. Sanji walked up and found he was still breathing yet covered in bruises and both his legs were trembling.

"M-m-maybe....." quiet as a breath, Usopp's raspy voice betrayed his sorry state. Pressing himself up a small measure, he found a hand offered by the cook, and grasped it to get back on his feet.

"Thanks a lot Sanji. Like I said, I want to get a little stronger. But this is really, really harder than I thought it would be."

"Well, you do have some strength in your legs. Enough to out run all the Genin, that's for sure." Sanji nodded to him. "Still if you want to actually use my Black-leg style, the rest of your body's at least 5 years behind where it would have to be for a real fight. If you want to get stronger quickly, this might not be the best way to do it."

The sniper felt pools gather in his eyes at Sanji's honest dressing down, until another voice cut into them. "Usopp," Zoro called over, now meditating in the centre of the ship. "It's admirable that you want to grow stronger. But... why do it by becoming like us?"

"You're you," The swordsman explained, "and that's important in its own way. Naruto, Sasuke....and Sakura. All of them ninjas. But each one does fight in different.....forms, from each other." Usopp and Sanji each waited for Zoro to keep speaking, but the swordsman had run out of things to say and was even scratching his head to keep going.

"He's an idiot, but Zoro isn't wrong," Sanji took over. "Look at Sakura. She found black-leg style, didn't work for her and asked Gin to learn a new way to fight. If you want to grow stronger," Sanji nodded to Usopp. "Then find what works for you and use that in your own way. If you're different be different and grow different from us. After all....." sparring a moment, the first-mate sent a grin straight at Ussop.

"You saved that girl, Kaya, by running to the right places at the right time. Her and those kids who followed you everywhere, with your slingshot."

The sniper hung his mouth open at Zoro as another opinion joined in. "The moss-head, I'll admit he has a good point this time. Ussop."

"You can out run everyone, you're a phenomenal marksman, you're good at setting-up traps in different spots, and you choose different tools to fight with: like fire, gunpowder, even food and a hammer."

Reaching down, the cook pulled his nakama back up to his feet and brushed some dirt off his coveralls.

"All of us have different talents, and different goals we want to put those skills to use for. Everyone on this crew has things they can't do, but others can. Get stronger in your own way and test different things on us, or Naruto with his clones."

Usopp kept talking with the top fighters aboard. While Sakura and Gin looked after regular sailing, Sasuke was up in the crow's nest as look out. And Nami pulled Sakura into the lounge, setting her at the dinner table for "girl-talk."

"Okay. Sakura, I feel like two things need to happen."

"Uhhh, what do you mean? Miss. Nami?" Looking about, the taller one had her head bowed, rubbing one arm, awkwardly. "Well, I did say Naruto is my little brother, now. He's kinda my responsibility, so lying to sneak any favour won't happen to you again. I guess gotta say I'm sorry for the stunt he pulled on you. I could go back and whack 'em over his head, if you want."

"No!" Sakura's reaction was instant, both arms extending out to block that idea. And putting the one subject front-and-centre. "And that too," Nami had her head up now. "Why didn't you take a swing when Sanji and I were right there, and Naruto had no place to go?"

"Because I promised sen...." The cabin-kunoichi stole a fresh scan of the horizon, hoping a new sign was there, but nothing. "Miss. Nami, I promised sensei, and myself too... all the way back when we got lost. And again after Naruto's meltdown and sensei told us how his childhood was." Nami watched two arms fold together, and press tight around Sakura's heart. Deciding to listen carefully and not stop her crew-mate, the taller girl came a tad closer as Sakura spoke. "Naruto had such a difficult life, all because others would blame him or look and see how bad he suffered, so hurt and so alone. Sensei, he isn't here but now I remember what he's said so much stronger."

"I was one of those people too... I'd knock him around, hurt him, and even would say.....I got it so wrong, I messed up so bad," Sakura confessed. "I won't go back and do that same wrong anymore... I don't want to screw up anymore." Sakura couldn't rise her eyes from the floor.

"So, you really do like Sasuke, don't you," Nami teasingly whispered. "Aaaahhhh..uummmmm." contrary to her actions, Sakura's blush began fading as the girl shook her head away and took deep breaths. "I....um..." Wringing her hands together Sakura kept searching for words and left Nami very, very confused.

"I did, I do, uhh maybe-but, he, I... hhh, it..." Sakura finally whispered, sitting down with a swallow. "Back in our village, I didn't know any about Sasuke. I mean, I thought I did. But I was so wrong, and only kept leaving him upset. He still looks real handsome, he talks to me now, and those muscles..." Inside her head, figures of multiple Sasuke's all together emerged, until a wet sensation on her chin Sakura out of it; she'd been drooling.

Nami found it funny, but the next moment the smaller girl had shame and guilt written on her face. "I don't think I should feel that way," Sakura went on. "He was raised with his family, then found all of them murdered. I knew about that but did nothing and was only a bother to him. I'd even fight with other girls about him, like Ino-pig, and...." Sakura's head slumped across the table, still moaning in the middle of her own spiel. 'Naruto would even ask me to go on a date, and the gentlest thing I did was shout no. When Sasuke said I was annoying, it hurt. And I said the same thing right at Naruto that same day.'

Things stayed that way long enough for Nami to finish her tea, Sakura's own standing ignored. "Have ever felt like this, about somebody, Miss. Nami?"

Nami's face fell, shaking her head, firmly. "No, never in my life. Actually..." Nami sat down now, folding her hands under her chin. "Between stealing money, hating any seconds I was with Arlong's

crew, and just trying to stay alive. The closest I've gotten to boys is arm candy to swipe away a lot of jewels and money. I've never had a crush or anything more on somebody else. When I was little I'd watch Bellemere play around with guys, sure. She'd even offer to pay for something 'with my body,' and I'd copy her, too."

A smile came, especially the memory of the face Genzo always made. "I know I'm real cute, I got a great figure, plus a wink and smile and any guy will do what I say. But Cocoyoshi Village and Arlong. Those were all that I've poured my life into since I was 10," Nami confided with the other girl. "I'm the last person to ask anything about a real crush on anyone."

"Oh, I'm, sorry, sorry," Scrambling, Sakura fell into a long apology spiel, planting one hand on her face and with other in her long hair. "Why do I keep saying things that hurt people? Miss. Nami, that's why I don't think it's right that I feel a crush on Sasuke. I didn't actually know anything about him or Naruto..." her left felt strands of her long hair, the lush pink locks she'd initially grown out because....

"Hey, don't get bent outa shape," Nami reassured her. "You know about it now, and change. Honestly, Luffy was one weird and wild mystery since I met him. But after his Grandpa... so much does make a lot of sense. Stay here in the present, don't think about the past so much if all you do is get hurt there. That is something I do know a lot of." Curling her lower lip under her teeth, Nami weighed different things and kept glancing outside where Sanji, Zoro and Luffy were. "WHaa... ahhhh... what made you look at Sasuke on day one?"

Sakura thought back, while a certain Inner-self was holding a long strand of hair. 'We grew this out because Sasuke likes long hair. But where did, or did we actually hear him say that? It hurt getting pulled by this too.'

Suddenly, the whole room shook, forcing plates, crates, one mop and supplies to sprawl across the floor. For moments the entire space continued vibrating, Nami trying to keep her balance while

Sakura stumbled for the kitchen where plates were threatening to fall until things grew quiet.

"Damn it. Captain, at least eat vegetarian. Not a full-on hunger strike!" At Sanji's shout, both of the girls sighed, half worried and half admiring the current situation.

"Captain Luffy's stomach might rumble so loud, his Grandpa will follow the sound all the way to us," Sakura mused. "All from punishing himself, over Kakashi-sensei's sacrifice."

"Hmmm," Nami, outside the younger pirate's sight, had a small blush. 'Forcing himself away from stuffing his face, all because Kakashi gave himself up. It's so....' Nami, familiar with Luffy's gluttony as far back as Orange town, actually brushed two fingers over her lips, recalling the-

Crash! Everything went sideways, throwing the room on its side from the Merry careening far to starboard. "What, did Luffy's stomach-" "That wasn't a rumble!" Nami exclaimed, sharply cutting-off Sakura. "Something erupted out of the water, or-"

"Na-Na-Na-Na-" "Awe crap! The Navy." At Zoro's curse, Nami exploded out from the Lounge. In time to see two halves of a cannonball barely pass around the mast. Zoro had one sword out, staring beyond the ship and soon everybody saw why.

4 Navy battleships were cursing towards them, with forward batteries erupting at steady rates for the tall and proud pirate flag.

"Sanji, let the sails loose! Gin the helm! Angle to the port side, we need space to cruise out of the firing line!" The Straw Hats snapped into action, Sakura shooting past Nami to join Sasuke with the sail lines.

"Sasuke," At Nami's shout, he jerked his head-up, yet kept both hands working. "Go and stand with Zoro, warn me if any cannonballs

fly to us and will collide! Sakura go the idea that your Sharingans can predict them."

"And somebody cut Luffy and Naruto loose."

"Yeah, let's turn and fight them!" Luffy's glee was all too clear in his voice. "I don't care if Grandpa's on that ship. Let's turn around, fight, you lot get Kakashi free, then we sail away! Shishishishishishi!"

...

"What? Hey, come on. Battle stations, everyone! Turn us around and fight!" At Luffy's words, Nami smacked her own forehead. "Strike that, only untie Naruto, Luffy stays tied up." Everyone agreed, with Sakura and Sasuke holding the captain down, and Sanji slid the Uzumaki out, and Nami took her little brother by the shoulders.

"Naru-" "I won't," Naruto promised to her. "Running straight up isn't the way to do it. I'll stay, I'll stay Nami-nee." Another near miss sprayed a light curtain of seawater over everyone on the Merry.

"Got him!" Sakura exclaimed, tying the last few knots around Luffy, which now were interwoven with ropes and extended arms and legs from an attempt to break free. Everyone wished for luck at Naruto's promise and got straight to their stations around the Merry.

Unknown that the entire scene had an audience, one that was not very far away and spying through telescopes and trying to catch up.

End.

It's not worth the wait. Not yet But I'm already on the next chapter and will not stop at all. I have tallied all the Reviews with votes towards the 14th Straw Hat member, and 2nd kunoichi, from the previous Reviews. From now until Crocus debut's, every can still vote for the following

Theory, for the final Poneglyph:

And from a small theory; I'm not certain if it's true or not, and in a year new expositions results might change it. To recap, by April 23, 2023, 3 out of 4 Road Poneglyphs had found and recorded by the Straw Hat pirate crew; located at Zou, Whole Cake Island, and Wano. Now, Poneglyphs are immovable, and were positioned at select locations for centuries: one in Alabasta (2 of them in the anime), one at Skypiea, one at Fishman Island, and the Road Poneglyphs in the New World. All of them were placed at the locations they rest on, so Big Mom and Kaido set up their bases at locations where the Poneglyphs were positioned; Kaido after Gol D. Roger's death and Big Mom long before then in the series timeline.

Each of the Road Poneglyphs were at one location before any populations set up their homes there. No Pirate, nor the Navy, can Move Poneglyphs around. There is a Rumour, referred by the Blackbeard Pirates, that the final "missing" Poneglyph is moved around on a ship; yet that flies in the face of prior facts established in the series.

All 4 of the Road Poneglyphs need to be in the new World, for them to contribute the navigation points required for a pirate crew to sail for Laugh Tale (or Raftel). Zou, Whole Cake Island (formerly Toto Land) and the Land of Wano. 2/4 were islands ruled directly by the previous generation of Yonko. A 3rd is on Zou, and the final one might, of all places, be on Elbaf. The home of the Giants, part of Shank's turf in the New World, and in the scope of nearly every ambitious figure in the One Piece world.

Reasoning:

Oda enjoys long foreshadowing, if Poneglyphs, Sanji's childhood, Sabo and Kozuki Oden are any indicators. And Elbaf was first introduced on Little Garden all the way back in IRL year 1999/2000.

All of the pre-time-skip Yonko were aware of the Poneglyphs, and one member in that exclusive club was an apprentice pirate on the Oro Jackson: Red-hair Shanks.

Elbaf is part of Shank's territory in the New World, and post-Wano, Shanks spoke about making his own play for the One Piece. How could he do this while unaware of all 4 Road Poneglyphs, and keeps his card tight enough to his chest to ensure that the final puzzle piece stays a secret?

Elbaf populated by giants who live for centuries (300+ years, average). Giants living there in the present maybe only 2 or 3 generations from the Void Century, and capable of keeping said Road Poneglyph secret due to few if anybody was daring enough to challenge them.

It's a major location in the New World, alongside Zou, Wano and Whole cake Island.

Big Mom may have had aspirations to forge an alliance with the Elbaf giants for a stronger reason than solely for their army. This is only a theory, and there's little to indicate that the Roger Pirates travelled to Elbaf, though I'd hardly imagine they never did. Of course, if I am correct, then the Straw hats & Red Hair pirates are on a collision course over that Poneglyph, and so are Red hair and Blackbeard.

Dragons and Sea Kings

Chapter 23x: "One after another:

Dragons and Sea Kings."

Important: Rewrite. Over the past 3 weeks, after getting Grammarly and re-reading my earlier chapters, I have edited and re-written each one to create a cohesive story and add smaller tweaks. None of the events have been re-conned over removed, everything has remained. Instead, aside from grammar and word choice, some extra details were added and others simplified, like the fight with Buggy and Alvida in Loguetown, Sakura getting cut at the Baratie or fighting against the Arlong Pirates. Plus, I split one chapter in half: Chapter 21: "No plan survives a Monkey D." Chapter 22: "Kakashi vs. Garp." If you'd like, re-read this whenever you'd like, and I guarantee it'll be more enjoyable.

Plus, Chapter 23 has been extended. Events in that chapter have been extended to span "Lost Island" and "Warship Island." You and read this chapter from beginning to end and enjoy it more. Or re-read from Chapter 1 and appreciate so more. Enjoy.

Welcome back, and first things first. After leaving this in suspense, no regular updates, and the mountain load of fresh votes since the last update.....The Kunoichi addition poll is closed.

4th place, with 3 votes=Rin Nohara. (clearly, somebody the fandom is not that enthusiastic for)

3rd place, with 35 votes=Hinata Hyuga. (over 10x more than Rin, surprisingly expected, but despite all the love, not the qualifier)

And in 2nd, the silver medalist, and nevertheless the one whom won't join the Straw Hat Pirate crew.....Uzumaki Karin.

THE WINNER IS TSUNADE! Tsunade won something..... God help me.

Suddenly all the obstacles that have been impeding my writing make sense. For now, read and enjoy a fresh chapter in Growth Through Chaos.

Disclaimer: I do not own Naruto or One Piece. They are the property and brainchildren of Masashi Kishimoto and Eiichiro Oda, respectively. "Growth Through Chaos," however, is all me.

"...."=speaking.

'... '=thinking.

""Inner thoughts""=images or memories within somebody's head.

Please Read and Review, with detail.

Cannonballs were flying, whistling airborne and landing in salvos around the fleeing pirate ship. "Sasuke. Shout when you see the next one! Gin, can you still hear him?" Sanji exclaimed from the mid-ships where he stood with Naruto beside him. "Hh. "/"Aye, Sanji. Loud an' clear." Both replied, Sasuke from the crow's nest with his Sharingan's trained on the Navy squadron pursuing them, and Gin at the helm.

"Lemme-." "No!" At Luffy's complaint, his entire crew shouted in sync. "Old Man Kakashi might be there!" The Rubber man continued kicking out, constrained to the mast of his own ship. "Zoro come cut me out. Then you, Sanji, Naruto and me rocket over, we sink the Navy, and look for Old Man-ashi!"

'We've been running for hours now, and that's all his mind's on?' Sakura mentally groaned. "Captain Luffy, if Kakashi sensei-" "Save it, Sakura," Zoro cut off the pinkette. "He won't give any more thought than the last three times we explained it. Just keep us sailing."

"Nami-nee," Naruto cried to her. "Do we need more speed?" Nami covered her face from whips of wind or sea spray. "That would help a lot. Yes."

"How about Sasuke, Sakura, me and 20 clones go standing on the water and push us?" Trying to imagine that, Sanji especially frowned until- "Incoming, for the centre!" Sasuke's warning came with both his eyes on the navy. Right on cue, rumbling announced a fresh salvo from the Navy ships.

"Gin, angle us to starboard! Everybody, tack!" Nami's commands were followed, Merry turning sharp to the right over the surf. "One is going to connect!" Everybody wince, except for Sasuke himself. Suddenly, in a cloud of smoke, he substituted with a Sakura, placing her in the crow's nest and him beside Zoro. "Kid?" Next, both swordsmen vanished in a cloud, leaving a barrel in place. Zoro was at the stern, Sasuke gripping his haramaki, and a cannonball dead in their sights. Focused, Zoro's blade sang from its white sheath, splitting the iron ball in twain; both pieces went sailing past him and Sasuke harmlessly.

"Whoooooa!" Usopp was close enough to see it, "real good save you both." "So. Cool!" Naruto sang with stars in his eyes. Zoro had sheathed his blade, then reached over the rub Sasuke's hair. "Good call, and some quick action, kid."

"Zoro, stay there watching for more," Nami exclaimed. "Sakura, get Sasuke back up there, fast." 2 seconds and both cabin-Genin executed substitutions, leaving Nami amazed, then looking at the third on the ship. "Naruto. I'm sorry but about pushing the ship. The answer is no." "But I can do it, believe it!" Nami still shook her head. "Why?" "Because Marines on those ships will have rifles. Just one sniper could kill any of you, or reduce your clones one-by-one. It'll leave us drained and no better off than before."

"Drained, like how Luffy looks right now?" Usopp's question pulled the brother and sister's attention onto their captain. Luffy was quiet and limp, doused from head to toe with seawater. Something that

gave their cook an idea. All as the chase continued, in sight of a crowd of onlookers off to the port side, some 4 kilometres away.

"Miss. Apis, please keep your head beneath the railing," Standing at the bow of their ship, Dragon spoke a gentle command, tall and unbothered as both occupants duct low; one deliberately, the other less so. "Mr. Kakashi!" Attempting to stand too quickly, Kakashi pitched forward. Landing hard on his knees and one elbow, Apis grabbed his torso as two thoughts flared in his head 'Chakra fatigue... now of all times.....My students, my comrades are-'

Rhythmic thunder came echoing in his ears, torturing the Jonin. He careened his neck in time to watch another salvo fly, erupting into waterspouts that obscured the fleeing pirate ship. "Mr. Face, Mr. Kakashi looks hurt," Apis called over. "And are the Marines coming closer? From that direction, we're right in their path!"

"Yes," Dragon answered the girl, who froze mid-crawl towards the fallen occupant. "They do approach us, in pursuit of that pirate ship. They may turn about, should fate demand we collide. Worry not." Protests were clear on Apis' face, but a silent look from Dragon silenced her. Motioning towards Kakashi, she looked, then with effort propped him into a less awkward position. "Kakashi. A spyglass is within the trunk you rest on," Dragon's voice reverberated. "Leave the large one where it is. The lens may glint in the sun that hangs over the Navy ships. Young Apis at risk is unacceptable." The girl froze, while Kakashi looked around, absorbing the warm rays on his forehead and mentally picturing angles such sunlight could bend. 'He's right. No cover to position beneath, and it only takes one flash to notice us. I'll have to be careful.' Kakashi held a tiny scope in hand, sliding the two pieces open, he crouched low, resting the spyglass centimetres above the deck and angled his eye to the lens.

Aboard Going Merry, 3 figures and another 6 half their size were trimming the sails. 'Sasuke... Sakura... Nami... why is Usopp so bandaged?... Where are Sanji, Zoro and Captain Luffy?' Through the lens, he watched the Merry turn south, changing the angle of

view and revealing Zoro and Sanji on the stern, both grasping some makeshift net with a hip with sandals, a head, and a Straw hat. 'What could they... be...' Through his mask, Kakashi's jaw could be traced from his gaping mouth. One load of cannonballs, he counted seven, landed in the expanded Luffy-shaped net. Then the cook and the swordsman pulled wide on the rubber-man-made net, elastically discharging the ordinance back to its senders.

"Inventive." Dragon voiced, as the return fire hit the prow of one battleship. 'That's something to say, I suppose,' Kakashi mentally groaned, then continued cruising his gaze around the deck.

'I don't see Gin, yet all the rest are accounted for outside. He must be at the helm.' Then turned his view to the squadron closing in. 'Can Vice Admiral Garp be aboard those ships?' With a shiver of dread down his spine at such a thought, beads of sweat could be felt along his forehead and palms. 'Was Luffy battered while they were sailing away? Can Nami guide them to evade the Navy, and if she can, what could their destination be?' Question after question came rolling through his head, stress mixing with his own helpless situation until he pulled the spyglass away from his face, and-

-spotted his own baby den-den snail on one wrist.

"Do not." Sharp as a whip, Dragon's voice cut through Kakashi's attention. The man wasn't even looking at him, only ahead, yet Kakashi caught a hit of red and some wider awareness about his saviour. "Navy vessels carry black den-den snails," Dragon spoke. "Those actively search and tap into calls made between other snails, eavesdropping on them." The looming figure didn't bother looking towards the younger man, still focusing only on the Going Merry and Navy ships with full attention.

'Eavesdropping?' Kakashi thought in the back of his mind, turning over and over anything he could do, or how the sailing ship could escape or fight off the pursuing squad. 'Nothing? Not ANBU training, nor Sensei went in-depth over naval combat. How can... huh...'

Turning his face, Kakashi felt pressure over his back building as some whistling force kept pulling on his hair. "What? Is the wind picking up?" Apis asked. Something didn't go unnoticed elsewhere.

"Another salvo's coming!" Sasuke warned. "We got it," Sanji and Zoro answered in sync. "Get focused, cook." "Just don't let him go, moss head." Then Luffy spoke up. "Just throw me and let's go see if Grandpa's hmm-!" Luffy kept shouting until another canon salvo landed in the net made from his elastic gut.

"Usopp, the yardarm needs another thirty degrees, and Gin, steer the rudder to starboard," Nami called from a sun table where sea charts and a small notebook lay open. "There's a current here we'll slide right into, then move out of range from the Navy. Eventually."

"How long will eventually be?" Usopp called over. And in a rare moment, the ship was relatively quiet. "Huh?"

"Nami? Hellooo?" Usopp asked the Navigator. "Now isn't the time for daydreaming. How long is eventually?" Nami remained stock-still, staring skywards and barely moving. "Nami-nee?" "Miss. Nami?" Naruto and Sakura both came right up to her, shoulder to shoulder and a blush crept across Naruto's face.

"Everyone hang-on!" Nami snatched both Cabin Genin with each arm then dropped in a low crouch.

"What was that?" The First mate called. "Zoro, Sanji, get down here! And Sasuke, hold tight!" Nami exclaimed towards the stern and up at the crow's nest.

"Nami, what is-" Sasuke tried to but- "No asking! It's coming!"

"What's coming?!" Zoro demanded, while Sanji came twirling around one corner, alone. "Nami-swaaaaaaa-"

"I'm free! Yeah!" Luffy's voice exclaimed, they tailed in the air behind him. Sudden, unexplainably, a powerful gust erupted straight into the Going Merry's sails, propelling her forward, going from average to beyond top speed inside of 3 seconds.

""-aaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANNNNNN!" Even Sanji's words went sailing into the air, from the unbelievable force billowing around the ship, sending anybody unready to nearly fly overboard. The cook went head-over-heels, until he found something to grasp, hanging on a plank from the stairwell by his fingertips. Gin lost his hold on the helm and hit a wall inside the lounge, while Sasuke went sailing out from the crow's nest and straight for open water.

"Kid!" Zoro's voice came. "Gum-Gum snag!" Something caught Sasuke by his shirt collar and held him there for a second before reeling him back in. Luffy and Zoro were grasping the railing of the stern, while the captain's retracting arm held its grip on the errant Uchiha, all while the Merry began leaping over the surf from the sheer velocity of such divine winds driving into her sails.

Winds coloured with a ghastly shade of green continued ploughing into the Merry and the Navy ships. Every vessel lost crew, equipment, or cannons overboard, entire masts were sent careening so close they wound up entangled, or the rest of the vessels threatened to capsize. While aboard the Merry, Nami had her back pressing to a wall grasping her arms around Naruto while he held on to her, but somebody stood tall beside them.

"Naruto! Grip the floor of the ship, like water walking." Opening his eyes, Naruto found Sakura standing upright. 'Huh? Okay... focus, mix the chakra. Feel just e... enough.' It took a second, but he found his grip and stood up.

"Now make clones and help Zoro, Sanji and Usopp. I'll get Captain Luffy and Sasuke." In no time, all of the crew were holding onto a copy of Naruto while Sakura ran to where Luffy was still reeling in Sasuke. Once he was aboard Sasuke rushed over to Zoro. "Naruto," the Uchiha barked. "Get to the helm, or we'll lose any capacity to

steer." With a nod, the clone left Sasuke, where the student held onto his teacher. 'This is luck. But why does this wind have a green colour?' Sasuke pondered right as the tint disappeared and with it so did the force propelling the ship.

The Going Merry kept flying until the keel met the water surface, cruising through their speed dipping low enough that everyone on board could stand unaided. "Bad wind!" Luffy exclaimed. "Battle stations, everyone! Nami, turn us around, we're going back to beat up those ships!"

"No!" Three different shoes, from Zoro, Sakura and Sanji sent Luffy face-down on the deck. "Dumbass!" Sanji barked. "We just got away from certain death, and you want us all to go back?"

"Old Man-ashi's gotta be there," Luffy insisted, single-minded as usual. "We're going back to find him, or tear through those ships to find some message, or writing, or something and say where Grandpa went with'em."

And one person agreed. "Yeah, that's a good plan. Come on, and follow me back!" Naruto appeared beside Luffy, rolling up both his hands. "Hey, why not Sakura, Sasuke and me go underwater? The Captain can fling Sanji-senpai and Zoro airborne, so we hit'em above and below? Believe it!"

Sasuke's and Sakura's rebuttals died on their tongues. 'That... But...' 'What...'

"Did... Gin?" Usopp held one hand up, whispering to Gin. "Did Luffy and Naruto both just give half-decent plans? One right after the other?"

"We aren't going back." Zoro strode forward, with Sasuke a half-step behind him. "How can you know that monster you're related to wasn't aboard those ships Luffy? And after outrunning so much fire, you honestly think Kakashi wants us to run directly back to the frying pan?"

"If Grandpa was there, those cannonballs woulda be faster. Or he'd leap high and punch a hole through the ship," Luffy answered him, and nobody asked how or if he was sure.

"Okay. I'm being honest," Sanji strode up, with a fresh smoke in his lips. "Maybe we should circle back. I managed to spot those ships hit by the same gust. They'd wind up scattered at least. Maybe even keeled over and at risk for sinking."

"We can't let sensei drown!" Naruto exclaimed. "Kakashi... is... a Jonin, dobe," Sasuke bit back. "If he could sneak up on Zabuza, plus slide in and out of Arlong Park, do you really think he'd get captured by anyone? Sakura reasoned that Vice Admirals can't be any stronger than Jonin, including Garp. He's not drastically stronger than Kakashi, or Hawkeye Mihawk, so an idea of our sensei captured hold under an ounce of sense."

"Good thinking," Zoro nodded to Sasuke, folding his arms. "We should stick to our arranged plan. Cruise around until we can spot Kakashi again. And keep dialling up people he'd sail to."

"No, we go back to the Marines, and right for Old man-ashi!" Luffy continued pressing for his plan with Naruto backing him up. Zoro opposed him with Sasuke at his hip/ Sanji took up the side opposite to Zoro, naturally, with Usopp and Gin standing neutral.

Few of them noticed something. Or multiple somethings that were missing around them. But somebody did notice. Looking about with curiosity. 'How can one gust of wind come erupting; then vanish so fast we don't even have any breeze?' Nami was looking around, to a flag, to the sails, and feeling the steadiness of the ship under her feet. So steady that... they...

"WGHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHHHHHHHHH!" One, long screech out of Nami tore through the arguments going back and forth. Everyone turned to look towards her, where she stood trembling through shock and sweat tearing through her. "Nami?"

What's wrong?" Luffy asked. "Are you hurt, Nami-nee?" "What is it?" Naruto and Sasuke's words went over her head.

"The-the-the-the ship isn't moving. We have no breeze. That current and the wind together! We're screwed! We entered the Calm Belt!"

"What's that?" Usopp asked. "GHRRR!" Gin collapsed, losing strength in both legs, and landing on his butt.

"Calm Belt! A part of the sea where nothing moves a muscle!" Nami screeched.

"Nami, don't make me hungry with muscles and clams," Luffy answered her.

"Oh, Sanji-senpai. Can we cook muscles and clams in Ramen?" Naruto asked.

".....Mr. Face. What's wrong now?" Apis, using a nickname Dragon had insisted on, questioned him. While Kakashi glared ominously at his companion. A companion wearing fear and apprehension written on his face.

"What is it?" Apis asked as well. "Mr. Face?" The girl had been celebrating after watching Marines toppling over each other from the powerful breeze. "Is there something wrong with the ships? Could that breeze come again and make us topple over?" She was gripping a necklace in her palm, something she'd held silently moments before, like a prayer.

Kakashi noticed all this, and when Dragon did not answer him began deliberating multiple options to try and force an answer.

In a whirl, Dragon strode to a small chest, pulling out a larger telescope and snapping it open. Lifting it to his eye, Kakashi followed suit, training his gaze further where the Going Merry had travelled. 'They look safe. 14 heads, seven of them blonde, and now I see Gin.

Nobody fell overboard. Are they arguing? Luffy and Naruto are standing tall with Sanji. Sakura gesturing at Usopp. Here come Zoro and Sasuke.... now Sanji is standing beside Naruto.... they stopped?'

'What is happening?' Moving his lens, Kakashi found Nami. 'She's... terrified. Why? Dragon has the same look. Neither one is moving.... wait, moving? Moving!' Kakashi grasped that his target had been stock-still the whole time. No dip in the water, no gradual slide forwards, and turning his scope to the sail painted with the Straw Hat's jolly Roger, he found it flat and empty.

"Where are they?" Kakashi calmly enquired towards Dragon. "Every part of the ocean has either a breeze or sea currents on the move. Or is that a part of the East Blue that is a calm haven?"

"They are no longer IN the East Blue," a hiss responded to him. "Currents. That final turn, mixing with sea currents and the massive wind propelled from out from the East Blue Entirely. And into the Seas that hold more death than the Grand Line. The Calm Belt."

"The Dead Seas?" Kakashi asked, cocking his head towards Dragon. "Nearly a month back, hearsay mentioned a second name for the space between the Grand Line and the Four Blues." Apis was listening now, while Dragon did not move his attention away from the telescope trained on the distant Merry. "It's called the Calm Belt, a space nobody would sail since, honestly, they're unable to sail. No wind, no currents, not even clouds hang over it. A complete stagnant void. That's self-explanatory enough for why sailors avoid it. Yes?"

"Yes," Dragon answered, simply. "Do you have friends aboard that boat, Mr. Kakashi?" Apis called up. "Well why don't we help-"

"That. And a second reason." Hearing that, Kakashi turned his attention back to Dragon.

When no further explanations came, Kakashi brought the spyglass to his eye again and found the Merry in time to see the ship tilt. "Well,

there has to be some form of movement," Kakashi answered. "I can see the ship mo.. -WHAT! UHK, WHA, WHA WAAAAAA....." Turning his head up, Kakashi's bare eye followed one rising body of water emerging from directly beneath the Going Merry.

One, then four, seven, followed by parts, fins, and more came erupting out of the water. Immediately Kakashi's sight of the Merry was lost, even his eye sliding away, just enough he could spot the massive forms erupting through the surface, gliding to varied heights and all of them terrifying. Snapping back, the Konoha jonin brought the scope to his eye again only to spot.

'EYES? TH-th-is-' Two pairs of eyes were probing opposite directions, like some aquatic chameleon. Then the walls of water fell, unveiling a collage of colours and shapes, strange yet structured enough to identify some form of creature. Every form was a creature, and so massive Kakashi lowered the scope and could still make out shapes from such distances away. Something he hadn't needed since....

'Those... that size...' Recalling his sensei summoning the Mighty Gamabunta, and encountering the sea creature Momoo at Arlong Park, Kakashi managed to at least begin thinking enough that his mood exchanged awe for abject terror.

"Sea Kings." Deep, worried tones came as Dragon spoke. "Those creatures are Sea Kings, natural forces beyond anyone's capacity to conquer or suppress. They venture across all the Blues," Dragon continued, "then gather within those distant waters for breeding. Sailors, the Navy, every Pirate Crew alive, now you see why none save the desperate sail into the Calm Belt."

Turning about, Kakashi found himself face-to-face with the inner hull, and his legs spread out before him. 'I fell?' Shooting to his feet, Kakashi brought the scope up again, then from the mass of sea monsters, found some coloured black and grey. 'Largest... largest... too small... too small.... there!'

The Merry was perched on the snout of some enormous ell, now even further away and too distant to pick out those aboard. Then suddenly, one smaller Sea King, not dissimilar from a frog, flew high from the waters for the Merry. The larger Sea King's head moved, causing a shift and-

With a gasp, Kakashi realized his lungs were burning. Sucking oxygen back in, he lost sight of his crew, again. Taking delicate care and forcing himself to breath, Kakashi digested how each Sea King appeared to his naked eye. All of them were titanic. Watching some breech or swimming about on the waves, it took a herculean effort to calmly raise the spyglass to his eyes and comb the view for the Going Merry.

There it was, perching atop the same behemoth's snout. Then suddenly, an eruption of black smoke billowed out from above the Sea King's mouth. 'Smoke?' Immediately, the creature's head rose, lips curling open to unveil jagged, house-sized teeth tightly shut.

Putting pieces together, Kakashi swore he felt hairs on his head turn from grey to white. Other Sea Kings were diving now, dissipating as the colossus's head bent backwards and shook.

"Is that big one gonna sneeze!?" Apis exclaimed. And sneeze it did. One, record-setting, colossal sneeze erupted from the Sea King, generating tidal waves, and launching the accidental occupant high. High enough and with such force the ship kept streaking across the heavens.

Collectively, Kakashi and Dragon each followed the path of the ship with both spyglass and telescope pointed skywards and turning without falling over. On, and on, and further the sea-faring ship went cruising above them yet dropping lower and lower that Kakashi even managed to spot those aboard for another headcount.

'Everyone's there. Gin and Usopp in the air, Sakura is... standing? Ah, clever, but Sasuke needs both hands. Zoro and Sanji are, hugging? There's Nami holding her arms around Luffy, and one

extended arm wrapped around... Naruto. And he's grinning.' Sure enough, Naruto's head was thrown back with a wild smile. 'Of course. And hardly the worst solution there was,' Kakashi reasoned, still following the ship. The...'... vanishing ship.?'

Turning his gaze to the bow, the spectators witnessed half of the Merry disappearing into an empty void. Within seconds the entire ship was gone like it'd evaporated from sight until the lip of a wave came into view. Kakashi shifted his scope down slightly, parallel with the ocean now and pointing... towards empty seas.

"A vanish island?" Dragon spoke. "A mirage?" Turning his attention away, while still holding the spyglass to point which direction to look through, Kakashi met a fierce grin. Their destination was set, no question.

Once the Merry stopped flying, she didn't stop. One impact and rather than sink down, the ship was airborne again. And again, then again, skipping further and further beyond a veil she'd passed through. Aboard, everyone was exercising muscles they didn't know they had to stay aboard and keep everything else from falling over. "Those ropes are gonna break!" A massive crash came below deck, "Akh, my weights!" Zoro exclaimed. "AAHAHH! Island!" Luffy, once again, was pinned to the mast and slid high up the pole until his head was resting under the crow's nest, giving quite the lookout's view of what lay in their path, and a destination. "We're gonna crash into an island!" "NOOOOOOOOOO!" Nami was holding Naruto's head in her chest, while Sanji had Sakura. With another skip everyone went bouncing, high enough they spotted the landmass Luffy had. "Wait, we-are we slowing down?" Usopp called. And he was right, slower, slower, skipping ripples in the sea, the Merry had one last skip and then came to a stop with one massive splash.

Rocking gently, somewhat, the Pirate ship had finally stopped but more than some moments passed as everyone digested what had happened. "Wh-wh-wh-" "We're clear," Zoro announced, untangling himself from Usopp. "Everyone, check yourselves and around the

ship," the swordsman ordered them, "Find what broke and what's still intact. We might've hit something and have leaks sinking us."

"NO!/NO!" Usopp and Naruto both exclaimed in sync, one scrambling out from Nami's embrace and then leapt overboard to go running over the waters around them. "OWW!" "Naruto?" "I stubbed my toe on something," the boy called up at Sanji's call. "Wow, there're some cool statues here, ya know." Walking to the railing, the entire crew aboard found their ship was surrounded by sunken ruins. Looking about, even the seawater around this strange island was lined with stone blocks, with stairways that led to a stone road curving up into a forest, thick knotted roots engulfing stone pillars, and peculiar statues shaped akin to some figural serpents. "Who would build stone under water like this?" Naruto asked. "They wouldn't, dobe." Glaring back up to the deck, Naruto locked eyes with Sasuke. "Who'd you know? You live here, and we've found a lotta stranger stuff, ya know."

"It's an abandoned island, little brother," Nami answered him, pulling Naruto's attention away from Sasuke. "Keep inspecting the haul. Zoro's right, we're lucky to get outa that nightmare, but something might've broken on our way down. I'll examine our charts and find out where exactly we wound up."

The crew examined the rest of the island leaving Luffy still tied up high on the mast. Sanji was pissed to discover everything in his kitchen had been scattered throughout the lounge, along with perishables that weren't stored away in the fridge. Usopp discovered his workshop wasn't any more chaotic than ordinary while Sakura opened the lady's bunk, then immediately slammed the door.

"Damn. We gotta massive problem, y'all!" Gin had opened the hatch to the men's quarters, shouted, and then leapt in. Zoro was the closest to him, bending low as well where he found Gin standing in a few inches of water. "Did my weights crash a hole down there!" "Whaaa!" Usopp materialized beside them, shoving Zoro away to scurry down. "It can't be, believe it." Naruto was back aboard, stripped to his waist and wringing a damp shirt out. "I didn't see

anything, even swimming underneath a few times. I saw no holes down there."

"Yer right," Gin's voice called him, as the man came back out from the hatch. "It's worse'n a leak. Th' strength weights down 'ere hit our freshwater barrels. They burst. Somebody, grab buckets, or we ain't barely save more than a few mouthfuls."

"Oh great!" Nami exclaimed, shooting to her feet, before placing one hand over her breast, sucking deep breaths in, and sinking down to her knees. "Nami?"/"Nami-swan?" Looking up, she found Naruto and Sanji peering over her, one of them carrying a glass filled with an orange smoothie and a straw. "Nami-nee, can't we just refill the water or get new barrels from somebody?" "Give her a sec, Naruto. There's ramen in the kitchen waiting for you. "RAMEN!" He was gone in a second, and Nami accepted the smoothie, pulling herself back up. "Thanks. I still can't believe we actually got away from the Sea Kings, all thanks to a sneeze." "All thanks to you inspiring him, and gorgeous, brilliant dove," Sanji sang over Nami. "Yeah," Luffy called down, "that sneeze was a great idea! You got awesome timing, Nami. Go and stick all that smoke in the Sea monster's nose?"

"Somebody with common self-preservation?" Sakura's eyes were blazing white and snarling with shark teeth. "That was the most thoughtless, reckless, scatter-brained, desperate plan Naruto ever made! Miss. Nami made one sneeze, so he went running and wasted so many paper bombs, and we blew away like snot so fast we almost hit an island!"

"But Sakura, it worked, didn't it?" Naruto was back outside again. "We were kinda desperate, too, ya know."

"You still spent a lot of our explosives, Naruto."

"No, I didn't, Sasuke," Naruto snapped with a grin. "I made three clones and had them set up all of theirs, then set them off." Pulling

out the few he'd been allotted, Naruto held all of them up. "Not one went to waste, believe it."

Sakura's finger, held in the air, slowly slid down with her deflating temper. Sanji even strode over to give Naruto a pat on the shoulder. "It worked, that's what matters in the end. Plus, nothing in the kitchen wound up broken. Unlike our cabin thanks to the musclehead's weights."

"What was that!" Zoro's forehead knocked against Sanji's. "How can that be my fault? And you just wasted water with smoothies and ramen?" "I had already measured it when Gin discovered them broken," Sanji answered, "and those had to have spilt out somehow, moron." Both boys were glaring face-to-face, with barely millimetres separating them. "I had to throw them aside, or we'd gotten hit with cannon fire!" "Laziness ain't an excuse, Mr. green man! "What you got, speaking out of turn at your first mate, cook!" "I only take orders from the captain, Sakura & Nami-swan. You're 200 years too stupid to join them!"

Usopp and Nami wound up steering Sasuke and Naruto away from taking sides between Zoro and Sanji. "Usopp, how are your injuries feeling?" Nami enquired with the bandaged sniper. Looking himself over, and turning arms, legs, and his torso, Usopp had an answer. "Okay, I guess. I feel good enough to patch up anything that broke on the Merry. And I should use the transponder snail to see if anyone we know has seen Kakashi, or not."

Nami nodded, then picked up how somebody was quiet. Luffy hadn't said anything since they'd come to a stop. One glance up the mast and she found why.... her captain's upper half was compressed under the crow's nest, including his lips. "Hey Sasuke, would you pull Luffy down before he stops breathing?" Following orders, and with Naruto helping too, both teammates did just that and the second Luffy's head was loose: "Somebody find water! Captain's order!"

"Huh?" Looking down, Luffy found most of his crew gawking up at him. "We gotta outa danger, we can't sail with only drinking booze.

And we still don't got Old-Man-ashi! Find water, then we set sail to get our ninja!"

'Whenever he says anything practical,' Nami shook her head, feeling the sweat and a soft thump in her ears, 'uh, it feels hot today.'

"Luffy's right," Zoro leaned away from Sanji. "Now this dump looks like nobody's been here in years. Anyone, is this place on any maps or charts we got?"

"That isn't a problem, Zoro," Nami interjected. "There should be found and fresh water here, no doubt. We should disembark and I'm going to collect my measurement tools."

"Miss. Nami?" Sakura asked her, "are you certain? This place looks like abandoned ruins. And half-flooded ones, too. We're still alone, too. If anyone did live here, wouldn't they have come down after seeing us descend from the skies?" Sanji, Gin and Usopp were each deliberating Sakura's points, while Luffy was now calling for somebody to tie him down.

"Nami-nee? Can Captain Luffy come free?" Naruto called down to her. "Yes," Nami spoke up without thinking, to her own surprise, but it was too late to rescind the request. Luffy was free now, and looking out over the deck across the ruins they'd landed in. "This mystery place looks like some fortress. Maybe it's a spot for fighting?"

"Who knows," Nami shrugged, stepping up beside him. "But people indeed would have lived here at some time. And that's how I know there's a spring or some source of fresh water on this island." Looking out across the area, Nami continued elucidating. "Whoever did live here wouldn't spend years installing these statues, or erect larger buildings, carved in stone. People need water every day, and without any, you don't find animals, let alone civilizations on any land mass. Without regular food or fresh water, this place wouldn't sustain any population for some time. Sure, it's abandoned, but people often migrate after some years or generations. And I didn't spot this island

anywhere on the maps that we have, so it's likely a lost or uncharted one, this close to the Calm Belt."

Most of the crew were listening, especially Sakura at the holes in her own conclusion. "Whoa Nami," Luffy's head would up right before hers, "you're real smart. How'd you know all that?"

"I'd come looking through spots like this, to find treasure," she explained, grinning forlornly at something on her mind. "When ruins get abandoned, people only take what they can carry, and so much gets left mind. Jewels, treasuries, archives, or something made from materials worth a few million berries. I read a few books on treasure hunting and archaeology, looking through ruins to figure out where to look and what. And these ruins could be especially ancient, maybe thousands of years old; back when people got around using canoes, longboats or on catamarans."

"So, we need to go searching, for water, for treasure, and so I can add this island to my own map of the world!" Half the crew were not that surprised at one priority, and the rest barely cared. "There are more important-"

"Buda-buda- buda- buda- buda... buda-buda- buda- buda- buda... buda- buda- buda- buda- buda-" All the snails was ringing. Or, all the snails attached to a person's wrist, not the large one. Sakura clued in fastest, with the simple-minded Luffy milli-seconds behind. "Buda-buda-click."

"Sensei/Old-man Kakashi?" Nobody on the breathed...."Yo?" Kakashi's voice spoke out. "Captain? Sakura? Are you the only ones there or-"

"SENSEI!" Naruto exploded, seizing Sakura's arm with both hands, and holding the snail to his face. "Where-where, where, say the word and I'll beat up that Garp guy to find you. Are you at Baratie, are you drowning, are you-hmhmwhmwrhry-Wrwrwr!" Somebody's hand muffled Naruto's mouth as the rest of the crew assembled around Sakura's baby den-den or clicked open their own.

"I'm not very far away," Kakashi answered, "I even was close enough to watch you all by those... Sea Kings, then fly off into the distance and vanish completely from sight." The snail's face grew dopy, and its voice sunk in a drawl.

"I cannot even pick between which to explain why I now have a strand of white hair." A few of the crew assembled let out deep breaths, mixing guilt with awe.

Zoro even looked one way while Gin held one hand to his temple. 'One... ah my crew... are still livin'. We met Garp, not so different than meetin' Mihawk, and nobody's lost.'

"How long until you can sail over and join us?" Zoro spoke up. "I imagine you want the cabin-genin to keep training until you reach here?" "That ain't imported, moss-head," Sanji cut in. "Say that to me again," Zoro dared him with a growl.

"Enough, no fighting!" Luffy was running for the snail, threw both hands over Zoro and Sanji's heads, then forced both together and held them there to vault overhead and draw up to the snail. "Old Man, Grandpa ain't behind you, is he?" Luffy pleaded, still holding two people face-to-face and...

"Come back here fast, captain's orders, if he ain't, okay?"

"I'm on a dingy with a young girl, Apis, and a certain.... Nami? Naruto...?" Nobody answered Kakashi. "Hello?" Everyone was watching the cook and the first mate... lip locked. They're lips had connected with furry building in their eyes until the pressure erupted and they exploded apart. "Ghk-pwh-aak!"/"ah-ahk-ahk-ahk" Zoro was throwing spittle from his mouth, and Sanji kept raking his fingernails over his lips and tongue. "Disgusting. Disgusting!" "Luf-LUFFY!" Zoro seized his captain's face, and held it there, tightly. "What in all that's holy in hell!? You just held Dart-brow's lips over mine!" "GGHHKK!" At hearing what Zoro confessed, Sanji collapsed, blood flying with each cough and his face a pale-white shade.

"Violation! Moss-head, ugly, disgusting moss-head taste is on my lips!"

"That ain't my fault!" Zoro shouted over at him. "Huh? Sorry Zoro?" Luffy asked him innocently. "We got Kakashi back. What're you both mad about?" They answered with a fist and a foot, "You made us kiss!/You made us kiss!" Launching Luffy skywards off the ship. Standing there, Zoro and Sanji were so furious most of their nakama cleared the deck. Usopp and Sakura were hiding, Nami had one hand over her lips, smothering a giggle, yet Naruto and Sasuke were each standing there, frozen and staring forward.

"Excuse me," Kakashi asked as the cooks and the swordsmen were still in hearing range. "Sakura? Did Naruto and Sasuke share another kiss?" The crew could hear a pin drop, freezing everyone who heard that. "I... take that silence as a yes. I'll hurry back and sit the pair of them down for.... a talk about a talk. These sorts of feelings are natural and-"

"NO! NO! BELIEVE IT! NO!" Naruto's exclamation made the whole ship hop on the sea. "LUFFY MADE ZORO AND SANJI-SENPAI KISS ON ACCIDENT!" With that confession, pandemonium erupted across the deck: Usopp falling over, Gin was shaking so much he couldn't make a sound, Nami was going cross-eyed staring between too many things, Zoro, and Sanji each squealed in terror, Sasuke took his turn sputtering out things nobody could make-out. And Naruto-

"I LIKE GIRLS!" the Uzumaki exclaimed. "TEME IS WAY TOO UGLY, TOO COOL, AND HE'S A GUY! DO YOU NEED MORE PROOF THAN THIS!" Naruto drew both hands together, his fingers pointed, and waves of chakra swirled about him. "HAREM-JUTSU! BARE FANTASY PARADE!" Immediately, right in front of Nami, the entire deck was engulfed with smoke, and out emerged several dozen naked teenage girls for all that the crew could see.

"WWWOWOOOOO! NARUKO!" Sanji was spinning in pirouettes, "NARUKO! TWIN NARUKO?! TRIPLET NARUKO'S?!" He was hyperventilating, turning from one sexy illusion to the next, then the

next, and the next with blood-red hearts in his eyes: basking in the medicine after his recent horror.

Gin, who hadn't seen this before, stood frozen with blood seeping from both his noses. Until he let out a loud "YEEE-HAAAAW!" He was touring the views alongside Sanji. Even Zoro stopped, drinking in the spectacle until he fell backwards overboard, with blood from his nose. "GHHHAAA! Beautiful!" Usopp was bowing in reverence to the fantasy brought to life.

"~Nar~ru... ~to~?" Immediately, the parade of sexiness froze, so terrified that every clone dispelled, leaving the deck empty. Gin, Usopp and Sanji were still on their knees and felt dangerous shivers running down their spines.

"Na~ru~to?" Nami tightly murmured, glaring with a tick on her brow, and her full attention on her little brother.

"Nami!" Kakashi's voice cut through the moment. "I am approaching you, with company. Do you recall somebody on the Going Merry in Loguetown before you and I went charging back to the square?" Thinking back to that moment, Nami blinked and put some implications together. "You found help from that man? Kakashi," Nami knelt by Sakura's wrist, "Naruto called that man 'Mr. Tattoo.' He was still aboard when we got to the ship and promised he'd find you/ Before Sakura, Sasuke and little brother Naruto went back on their own."

"Well, he delivered on that promise. Mr. Tattoo, is here," the snail answered as the rest of the Straw hats caught up; Zoro needed a

few extra blinks to recall once he got back aboard. "The pair of us are in a dingy, with Apis. We found a young girl drifting alone in the sea, and she appeared quite excited about where you wound up flying to. I won't make you wait. See you shortly." With that, the snail went asleep.

"WWWWWWWWWHHHhHhhy?"

The further he flew up the island, Luffy's cries dimmed to a light hum until a rumble in the trees and several dozen scattering birds identified where he landed. "You/I'm go find water!" Zoro commanded Sanji at the same moment the cook declared the same. "I'm/You go training." "This! Never! Happened!" With that agreement, both strode in opposite directions, grabbing their respective proteges on the way and continued off the Merry.

"Nami, Sakura," Zoro called back, "Go find our idiot captain. If he finds me first, I'll cut him and still sleep soundly tonight." Sanji had nothing more to say. Usopp crawled out from his hiding place behind Gin. "Ah guess you, me an' Sakura are stayin' aboard, Usopp." At Gin's suggestion, Nami finally got a grip. "Uh, uh-uh, nope, nope," Nami announced, crossing her wrists over themselves. "I'm not going after Luffy."

"Why?" Usopp's question was answered with a pause. Nami still felt a tickle pass her lips. "Why? Uh, why-oh!" "I'm not going alone, of course. Sakura, grab a few of those storage scrolls and come with me."

"Why Nami-san?" the younger girl enquired. "Oooo, wellll," Nami answered with money signs in her eyes, "these ruins mean lost

things. Lost things somebody meant to come back for or failed to recall in a hurry. We might even find a buried hoard, or treasure on this island."

"Of course, she wants to go on a treasure hunt," Usopp voiced aloud. "I can see where Don Luffy landed," Gin announced, pulling the other nakama's attention to him. "He's somewhere up da ruins." Gin passed a spyglass to Sakura and fixed one arm on the tree line. "I see it. Nami-san, let's go."

Soon the girls were on a hike, following a wide paved round from the stones positioned by the shoreline. Sakura's eyes were everywhere, taking in the position, the larger blocks flanking each path, and after several minutes she turned around. 'Whoa.' From up top, she drank in with her eyes how the Merry sat in the bay, lined with the stones identical to those they'd walked over, with parallel abutments forming a square field. 'It's a small pool. And maybe this was a road once upon a time?' Her own Inner-voice was quiet, too, sitting at a mental desk and working to sketch it out, until. "'Wait, Nami-san is moving. Let's go!'"

"Hey Sakura. Did you find something?" "No, Miss. Nami. wait up." Once she was parallel, Nami and Sakura strode further up until they encountered structures, open fields and... "Could those be Sea Kings?" Sakura was kneeling by a fallen statue, (description) "Maybe. The one I've seen up close was Momoo. The ones we just got away from hardly looked identical." Nami was standing back, staring over the fields to pick out details. "That's not the only statue. But I don't think they're Sea-king's either."

"Why?" Sakura stared over her shoulder. "Look closely," Nami encouraged. "There's another one out there. I saw several more sinking in the water close to our ship. And there another attached to the roof of that house." A glint in the sunlight caught Nami's eye and she strode to a patch of grass. Kneeling, she quickly stood up examining something in her palm. "The design's engraved on this pendant, too. Maybe it was a popular image, or people that lived here identified themselves with it."

"Oh," Sakura reasoned, 'Like headbands between shinobi, or how pirates and marines each sail under a certain flag?' "Miss. Nami, could that pendant be treasure, then? And, if we're looking for things that people left in a hurry, shouldn't that involve searching every house?"

She was right, and the mention of treasure pulled 100% of Nami's attention to their goal. "Yup, let's get to it." Picking the one with a statue still attached to its roof, Nami carefully slipped inside the stone hut. Glancing around, she moved in further with Sakura behind her. They found moss indoors and cool shade, with a few patches of grass and plants but otherwise the dirt floor inside was cool and damp.[1]

"There isn't any furniture, and I don't see a safe," Nami spoke up. "Check the floors. Maybe somebody buried their positions and intended to come back later." Kneeling, Nami brushed away dirt and soil, looking for any hint the ground was disturbed. Sakura did the same, but her hip nudged one of the stone blocks in the wall. A low groan came from that, building louder and sharper. Nami glanced at it, then up to the roof above them where the source of the groan was centred. "No! Oh no!"

It collapsed, with a sharp crack. Part of the wall shifted, with the roof and iconic statue falling inwards over the house.[1] Dust clouds shot up with no sign of either Nami or Sakura, until a separate stone outside vanished in smoke, revealing them both kneeling with Sakura grasping Nami's shoulder.

Both took moments to catch their breath. "Uh... perhaps it would be safer if we didn't look inside of these houses, Miss. Nami."

"No, no-, ummm." Nami got her breath back, turned and examined a separate building. With no such roof. "Let's have a look at that one." Walking up, Nami's hopes were dashed at multiple stone blocks scattered inside. "We'd need an archaeologist to dig our way through this to reach the floor. And I don't see any safe, or wall cavities either."

Moving on, the pair kept poking around individual structures (features) [3] with a lot more caution. Some houses only had a few walls standing with rubble scattered inside and scattered about in a random spray beyond it.

"It's too bad so many of these are too unstable," Nami complained, staring at one, then between Sakura and the door. "Nope. You're only around 1 foot smaller than me. I should have brought Naruto with us. The shortest on the crew to poke around could poke around any of them, or go investigate with those clones of his." [4]

Immediately, Sakura froze and sank to her knees. "Huh? Sakura?" Nami knelt beside the girl, unaware of another voice inside Sakura's head. "'A foot? A full foot?" Inner Sakura was measuring her chest with a ruler, then examining a whiteboard with diagrams of Nami's chest. Comparing both, jotting equations in a notebook then a few equations later and "See's right....." Both the real Sakura and her mental self were kneeling forwards with gloomy clouds hanging above their heads. It took several moments for Nami to rally her, but Sakura would not share why, instead stealing glares as the navigator's stacked assets would sway over the course of their hike.

They did find buildings with open sunlight, with the interiors overgrown with plant life. "How about inside these, Miss. Nami?" Sakura enquired. "Maybe." Nami pulled a tiny notebook from one pocket and taped a pen open to one page. Sakura stood there witnessing Nami glance over their surroundings, down to the bay, further up the hill, then gradually make casual strokes in the book. Stepped around her, the girl found it was a surprisingly detailed map. "We'll come up through here again looking through them. For right now, I think Luffy's somewhere by the large temple up this hill. Let's head there and find them, then poke around it for more treasure."

Deposits the book away, both girls continue up the paved road spiralling further to the peak of the island. Nami made multiple glances back behind them to gauge where the Going Merry was, and after a single hour pulled open her baby den-den.

"Buda-buda-buda-buda-buda....buda-buda-buda-buda-buda... buda-buda-Click. Who is it?"

"Zoro?" Nami answered. "How is everyone? Who's still aboard the ship.?"

"The sword pair are still off training, my darling," Sanji's voice answered. "Naruto and I made a few trips for fresh water and he's cleaning the kitchen down now. Usopp... he actually asked me about learning Black-Leg style like Naruto is, so Gin's on look-out." That surprised the girls, who each nodded and then turned over towards where the speck of their ship stood on the waterline. "Sakura and I haven't found Luffy yet. Gin, can you spot us along the stone track and lend some directions for how close we are to where he flew up here?"

Back down ton the Merry, Sanji flushed at the mention of Luffy's name, and felt an itch to have something slam into his head and drive that horrid memory of a.....'A violation! That was a violation that Moss-Head and I both suffered.'

Desperate for a distraction, he looked over where Usopp was holding a bizarre pose, then snapped two wild kicks up high but slipped on the landing. The cook had approached Sanji about more ways to fight, and while he'd accepted Sanji had highlighted the bandages covering Usopp. 'He's stubborn. It's too early to see if he's dedicated, plus Sasuke and Sakura both abandoned learning from me since we left the restaurant.'

"Drop down into plank, or practice stances, Usopp," Sanji steered him back to what they had been doing. "And those kicks would only miss their target if a real foe was charging you."

Usopp slumped over, embarrassed, yet he still dropped low but both arms on the deck while Sanji's foot was prodding at his legs, gut, and butt, forcing the boy into the correct positions. "You're smart for

wanting to get stronger. But unless you can physically pull them off, learning my kicks will only leave you exposed."

Further up the hill., Gin guided both the girls around until they found multiple flattened trees and a long indent in the earth. All leading to a sizable hole. "Did he go inside?" Crawling forward, Nami and Sakura found a solid wall with a narrow corridor extending to either left or right. Picking one, they continued walking through the complex and into a large antechamber with a larger room beyond it. "Luffy?" Nami called with two hands cupping her mouth. "Nami? Hiya Nami, in here. Come and see, come and see who's here." Walking further inside, Nami and Sakura discovered a circular atrium with an awe-invoking dome ceiling. Luffy sitting on the ground inside, and he wasn't alone.

"Sensei?!" Sakura exclaimed. Indeed, right there in the centre, beside Luffy, was Kakashi Hatake. Turning at the call, the iconic figure was sitting on a stone slab beside Luffy with a pair of long sticks beside him and appeared exhausted. "Ah, hello there," the masked man waved to them with a lazy effort.

Sakura broke into a run, with Nami jogging behind her, and threw both arms around the greyhound. "Phhh." "Sensei, you are back! You are back-wait!" Scrambling away, Sakura stood before him with both hands planted on her hips and glaring to him. "Why didn't you call us that you were here? And why didn't Captain Luffy call over a snail?"

Nami, jogging up behind her, stopped short immediately, and noticed they were not alone either. Two additional figures stood a few meters away: a tiny girl with a yellow dress, long braids down her back and a tall white cap on her head, plus a looming figure in a green cloak. The girl was staring back at them, while the other was unbothered and had his eyes trained on the ceiling. Nami followed that gaze, while Sakura continued glaring as Luffy glanced down at his wrist.

"Uh. Oh, I forgot. Shishishishishi. Sorry," Luffy answered. "I was looking in here for some meat," and an impressive rumble came at that word, echoing through the chamber. "But then I found Old Man and got too happy. Sorry, sorry." Luffy still wore a wide grin, while Kakashi fetched a set of crutches that were resting on his left and tried to stand up. "Sakura... hh.....our.....my guests.....they want to.....explore. I was.... a little... drained and wanted some... hh.... some quiet time before Naruto.....and Luffy could tackle me."

Sakura could easily imagine that, and more puzzle pieces fell into place with only a few outliers. "But sensei, you said you were a long way away after Zoro and Sanji kissed. How did you get here so rapidly?"

"Who cares?" Luffy exclaimed, rocking back and forth in his seat. "Kakashi's back and we got two new friends. They wanted to look around this mystery place, so I said yes. Then I gotta carry Old Man down the hill since he's choka tired."

"Chakra, Captain Luffy," Kakashi warily set-straight. "Sakura, I'm more exhausted than I felt after Zabuza. And since Mr. Tattoo," he nodded to one side, "decided to carry me around, he wanted to explore with Miss. Apis. I....." With a hint of embarrassment, Kakashi gave in to the inevitable. "I couldn't.... walk down to... anywhere." "So they had to carry you," Nami smized.

"It's incredible how you've found Lost Island!" the girl, Apis exclaimed. "I live close to here, on Warship Island. Mr. Face and Mr. Kakashi saved me after I got lost in a storm. Once there we have a legend about a place called Lost Island with the Dragon's Nest. And thanks to you flying off that Sea king-"

"This isn't the Dragon's Nest." Mr. Tattoo interrupted Apis' glee. Everyone turned their eye to him as the figure drew back a hood, revealing raven-black hair, a strong face plus one distinctive tattoo covering half his face.

"You?" "Indeed, me," the figure answered, his actual name unknown to all but Kakashi. "As I have promised, Kakashi is reunited with you. Fate....is unquestionably a curious, fickle force in this world."

"Look to the ceiling." Following his instructions, Nami and Sakura were floored by amazement over the murals spanning the roof. "Hey, are those the same designs of the statues outside, and the pendant, Miss. Nami?" Nami drew the keepsake back out at Sakura's words, and Apis scurried up for a close look, too.

"Millennial Dragons," Mr. Tattoo spoke up. Nami, Sakura and Kakashi each turned their attention on him. "Creatures which, by legend, can live for over thousands of years. The murals above, and throughout this island, depict those wondrous creatures. I have some colleagues with a deep interest in archaeology, and this find will undoubtedly fascinate them."

"But what do you mean this isn't the Dragon's nest?" Apis complained and immediately covered her mouth with both hands. Staring between Kakashi, Sakura, Nami and Luffy panicky, she was caught in a spotlight which Kakashi and Sakura noticed, but Nami still had her attention on the ceiling.

"Yeah, look closely there." Raising her finger, Nami drew their attention to one section, where people were arranged kneeling or facing the fluid, winged creatures in the sky. "It looks like two islands are depicted up there. One of them has a dome, like this one. And opposite to it is another with extensions. It.... almost looks like a battleship." Indeed, the others, even Luffy picked up on the details easily, with Sakura examining more of the figures and Luffy looking at one person, then somebody else.

"Hey Apis, didn't you build this place?" "How could she Captain Luffy," Sakura admonished him. "This island is abandoned, with hazardous ruins probably thousands of years old."

"But her hat. Look at it," Luffy pointed at Apis, then a kneeling figure on the roof, and back. "Same hat, the one Apis is wearing and up on

the nice picture." Sakura could feel her tongue tying itself into knots, and so did Inner Sakura over that detail they hadn't picked up on.

"Apis?" Nami asked. "Does that part of the mural look like Warship Island? You said you live there."

"Well-spotted, boy," Mr. Tattoo spoke up. "I have visited that destination and indeed, the mural depicts Warship Island near-perfectly."

"Please, cease cause Miss. Apis such discomfort." At the request, Sakura tore her eyes away from the other girl and down to her shoes, guiltily. "Miss. Apis admires the legend. She spoke of it to me at one phase of our journey when Kakashi was asleep," Mr. Tattoo continued. "Legends of the Millennial Dragons and Lost Island are not universally synchronized. Instead, they remain separate, and some tales of these creatures include how their bones would be bought and sold for immeasurable value."

"Sold? Immeasurable?" Nami's glee was clear in her voice, with money signs in her eyes. She was drooling at that news and sped up to their company. "Tell us more. I have... an academic interest in the legends?"

'Academic.... or profit?' Kakashi dryly thought. "Hey Nami," Luffy spoke up, "didja see any of these mystery dragons on the way up here?"

"There are not," Mr. Face answered. "This Lost Island, however, like other myths, appears to have been combined with the Dragon's Nest. Evidently, from this mural, they are not one and the same."

Mr. Face then pulled a sizable tomb from beneath his cloak, and a pen. Opening it, he fixed the ceiling with a careful look then took the writing instrument to a page. Sakura studied the mural too, as did Kakashi, Apis and Nami, while Luffy just sat there, swinging his legs. Until another rumble from his stomach echoed throughout the room.

"Man, I'm hungry. Hey, you all are here! Let's get food!" Immediately, Kakashi and Sakura were snatched off their feet, and Nami felt something snake its way around her hips. "Luffy?!" Facing away from them, Nami's scarlet face was hidden by the tight grip wound around her, then yanking her off her feet. "Apis. Mr. Tattoo. Follow me for a party!"

Luffy took off, with Nami slung over his shoulder and the other two nakama held under his opposite arm.

Tearing through the antechamber, Luffy went barrelling outside the looked around. "Merry... Merry-ah, the Merry!" Spotting his ship, he took the direct way down, running towards a cliff wall and leaping over it. While the girls kept screaming, his sandals landed on a slanting tree root. Sliding down, Luffy kept his balance and was laughing at the thrill, moving further and further on until the root grew narrower and he had to leap into the sky again.

"Hahahahah!" "Ahahhhh!" "Luuuuuuufyyyyyyy! Let, let me down!" Nami thoughtlessly demanded, even kicking her legs out. "Why, I'd drop you, Nami?" Instead, Luffy changed his grip on her, with his thumb digging into her spectacular ass. All while they kept sliding down, skipping over roof-tops, or jostling when Luffy had to run over spots. "Guyyyyyys! Hey Guuuyyyss! We got'em We got'em!"

"Captain?!"/"Kakashi!?" "Oh, Zoro! Sasuke!" The pair with swords were standing in Luffy's path, with amazement on their faces, and Luffy wasn't slowing down. Instead, he went barreling right past them and on to the Merry growing closer and closer to the second.

"Don't crash!" "Why not? I'm made of Rubber?" "We aren't!" Kakashi exclaimed at Luffy's answer to Sakura's request, and they were barely a few dozen meters from the Merry now.

"Nami-nee!" With the last shout, Luffy collided with the Merry so hard the entire ship shook on the water. "Guhha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Guy, I got Kakashi back!"

Nobody answered him. "Huh?" Luffy was sitting in the midships of the Merry, with splinters in the deck and nobody else around him. Looking left and right, he found two large square blocks stuck out from the deck. "Nami? Old-Man? Sakura?"

"WHaaaaaaa! Luffy, you, you," Usopp scurried down from the lookout, spluttering, and drove a heel-kick into Luffy's skull. "What did you just do wreck the Merry like that!"

"Huh? But I found Kakashi and got hungry. So, I came running straight down here. I even passed-oh, Sasuke and Zoro." Jumping to his feet, Luffy scanned his eyes over the island and found where he'd gone past those two. The next moment a long arm shot out, looping around both Zoro and Sasuke too fast for them to evade. "Uh?" Immediately, their feet left the earth.

"Luffy, we better not Craaaaaaaaaaash-!" Yet, they crashed. The Merry shook on the water again, with both Zoro and Sasuke colliding with the haul too fast for one to swap out with a substitution.

"Sanji! Time to eat! Time for a Party! Let's Celebrate!" Luffy was ecstatic, until behind him half a dozen figures arose with ire.

2 hours were gone and it was the middle of the afternoon. Luffy's face still was various shades of purple, with swollen lips and ears, and his rubber nose was tied across his face in a knot. Naruto was still refusing to leave Kakashi's side, Sanji had prepared a massive banquet, and everyone had mugs in their hands.

Except for the Genin, who Kakashi insisted were not allowed alcohol. "I had my first sake long before I was their age, Old-Man," Zoro argued. "No," was Kakashi's only answer, and he was not alone. "My little brother isn't allowed any drinks either, not until he's fifteen," Nami declared.

"This smells so delicious," Apis complemented Sanji as the cook stood guard over a sizzling platter he was cooking over open flames.

"What could that Mr. Tattoo still be doing all the way up there?"
Usopp asked, leaning backwards in his seat.

"He mentioned that he wanted to look over the ruins and was drawing on a large paper sheet when we left him," Sakura answered. She and Nami had changed from their regular clothing into the new wardrobes taken from Loguetown. Nami wore a deep pink bikini on display through a translucent skirt around her waist. Sakura had changed into a baby-blue one-piece suit, with booty shorts and a white crop top over it, with occasional glances at the navigator with envy.

"Swanshi? Hoth mush thime phor meath?" Luffy question required a moment to translate: 'Sanji. How much time for meat?'

"It's ready when it's ready, you idiot," the cook answer. "And after putting two holes in the ship, you get to help yourself last. The first portion goes to Kakashi, the ladies, and our mademoiselle guest, Apis."

"Hey, so Kakashi?" Usopp spoke up. "How did you wind up getting to this island so fast?" At the question, Kakashi looked over at Apis. "That is something I owe to her." Munching on her dinner, the girl noticed people had grown quiet and looked up. "What? Is there... something wrong?"

"How'd you get Kakashi-sensei and Mr. Face here so fast, my lady?" Naruto asked her. Immediately, she nearly dropped her meal and was squirming, trying to hide away from the spotlight. "Could it, be a devil-fruit?" Nami spoke up. "It's okay, really," the navigator gently coaxed, "our captain ate one a while ago and it made him most of him into rubber."

"Yeah," Luffy snagged one corner of his mouth and pulled, stretching a quarter of his face aside by 2 feet, held it then, then let it snap back together. "Whoa!" Apis' surprise was not hidden on her face. And now more relaxed, she answered. "Well, when I was little I ate one. It

was called the Whisper-Whisper fruit, or something. And since then, I've been able to understand or talk to almost any animal."

She continued to explain: "After Mr. Kakashi, Mr. Face and me watched you all come flying here, Mr. Kakashi decided to try calling you, but we remained still too far away. So, after moving closer and a short call, he hung up and a Sea-king came erupting out of the water."

Kakashi thought back to those events while Apis continued explaining. *'Kakashi closed his baby den-den, and immediately a massive form came erupting from the waters behind him. Spinning about, his head swam from chakra fatigue, but his body didn't fall. A geyser of water came soaring up beside them as Dragon merely turned his head and Apis let out a scream. Pale-green scales materialized as the water column climbed higher, and Kakashi recalled a similar event with a giant Sea-cow.'*

'A massive Sea-King revealed itself, staring at the tiny ship below with a hungry eye. "Shit!" "EEAAAAAaa!" Another screech masked the curse Kakashi let out. The behemoth reared its head, then froze completely. The predator's eyes expanded to twice their size, staring down at them completely cowed. 'Is.... this Sea-king is sweating?' Indeed, from the Sea-King's head a steady stream too regular to be seawater was pouring out. Following its gaze, Kakashi finally noticed it was staring down at someone, and Dragon was staring up at it, meeting the beast eye-to-eye. Keeping his gaze transfixed, the sea surface around them was moving with the creature's trembles, but it wouldn't or couldn't leave.

"It's sorry. Mr. Face, this Sea-King is sorry." Apis had spoken up, staring from their visitor, over to Dragon, then to the horizon and back. "Mr. Face. Listen, I can hear what this creature is thinking. It sees strength and wants to swim away. Don't let it." "Why?" Dragon asked, keeping his eyes locked with the Sea-King's. "We don't know how long it'll take to sail after Mr. Kakashi's friends." "You," Apis was speaking up to the Sea-King now. "If we let you have food, will you

pull us to where we want to go? And Mr. Face will stop scaring you?"

"The big Sea-King said yes, he was pretty terrified of Mr. Face. So after throwing a line to him with a steel rod, he pulled us all the way here, enough through a storm that came out of nowhere, and straight to the other side of this island. We thanked it and threw it some food. Then some birds told me about the temple all the way at the top as it swam away."

Out of the Straw Hat, each of them digested this news separately. "The guy... all he did was glare at ah Sea-King. An' it followed commands?" Gin asked, with more awe than disbelief.

"It's real," Luffy declared, his lips now back to normal but his nose still tied in a knot.

"You think so, Luffy?" Sanji enquired at their captain. "Uh-huh," Luffy nodded, barely reacting. "Shanks did that same thing when he saved me. Only he said, 'Get Lost,' and the Moster got outa there. Mr. Tattoo has gotta be a strong guy and good guy if he's like Shanks."

Most of the crew digested this, gradually, then looked up over the island, wondering where this mysterious figure could be. "Well, I'll set aside one portion if he comes down and joins us," Sanji resolved.

"But the big thing is, we got Kakashi! Everybody!" Luffy raised his mug to the air, pausing for the rest to join him. And join him they did. "To Kakashi!"

"KAKASHI!" Everybody cheered. With that a full celebration kicked-off: barbeque, stories, laughing, games, and Luffy sticking a pair of chopsticks between his jaw and nose. Naruto copied him, then witnessed Zoro and Gin arm-wrestling. Before long he and Sasuke had their own contest, followed with a swimming race with their mentors inching them on. "Kick harder, Naruto!" "Stroke with your back, Sasuke!" The score was one-one, when Zoro and Sanji chose

to break the tie with a challenge between them with a two-on-two climbing race up a cliff.

Sakura stood at the top, with Nami at the bottom, "and no clones, Naruto!" "Awwwwwww, I was gonna carry Sanji up," the blonde complained, earning glares from the other team. "Ready. Set.... Go!" With two climbing up the usual way and the genin using chakra-grip, Sasuke and Naruto shot up the cliff, Sanji leapt high to get a solid grip and climb... with Zoro copying the ninjas and landing flat on his back without chakra. "~Stupid Moss-head~" Immediately from the taunt, Zoro was back up and climbing behind Sanji's sizable lead. Naruto was laughing too, until his leg met something, and he fell back and down, right into Sanji. Sasuke had a smirk while retracting his leg, but did not spot Sanji catching Naruto on the way down. Zoro was even with both now, and Naruto got an idea. Once his chakra-grip was solid on wall, the Uzumaki seized Sanji and sped up the wall again pulling his teacher behind him.

"No cheating, dobe!" "Nobody said that wasn't allowed, Sasuke," Nami answered the boy, standing up passed Sakura and watching victory slip out from his hands. "Naruto and Sanji win!" Sakura announced, with a sheepish look at Sasuke. "Wha-hoooo!" Zoro still hustled up the wall, then once they were all at ground level he planted a mug of beer before Sanji for a fresh challenge. On and on the party went winding late into the night until the rest fell asleep where they stood. Except for one person.

Hobbling away from the campsite on a pair of crutches, Kakashi had Monkey D. Luffy on his shoulders, snoring loudly in his ear. 'I certainly need, to get myself some earplugs,' Hatake made a mental note. 'Now... where is he?' Moving to a solid block, Kakashi sat down, depositing Luffy beside him and waited. Waiting. Waiting.

"You want me to meet him?" Somebody behind Kakashi asked.

"Do you not wish to? Monkey D. Dragon," Kakashi whispered. Sitting back-to-back, both men were staring at Luffy, as a bubble of snot popped from the snoring figure.

Several minutes later, Luffy was even further away from the cape, with Kakashi trying to wake him up. "Luffy." Clapping. Prodding. Even twisting one ear didn't disturb his sleep. "You're missing food."

"Food!" In under a second, Luffy was wide awake. "Where's Old-man-ashi? Huh? Why aren't we on the Merry?" Looking around, Luffy took in the shadows of night between the abandoned ruins. "Food for thought. Somebody here wants to meet you." Kakashi turned his head, and Luffy followed, spotting somebody standing tall to one side.

"Hello, Luffy," with a fierce grin on his face, the figure continued standing before them. "Ahh? Who are you?" A moment. A second moment.

It took six until Luffy recalled. "Oh, Mr. Tattoo!" Leaping to his feet, the Straw hat had to scratch his head, then boxed forward. "Thank you for saving Kakashi. I am in your debt, and offer my graginitude....no my fruititude.... huh, uh?"

"There is no need for gratitude," Mr. Tattoo answered with amusement in his voice. "There never should be, between either you and me, Luffy. Tell me. What do you know, of your father?"

"My Dad?" Kakashi was inching away as Luffy scratched his head. "Do I have a Dad? I don't know. Do you?"

End.

About the final Straw Hat Shinobi. Joking aside, Tsunade and Karin were neck-in-neck, changing the lead day by day, until one pulled far ahead of the ret. The final results were Karin=48 votes, and Tsunade=62 votes. I exclusively counted only a single vote from every Reviewer. Any messages which had more than one vote, the first one named was counted. Instincts and pacing rarely lie when you watch them closely, hence the first name that somebody typed down, (x, and [blank]) that told whom somebody especially wanted to see unless stated to be a secondary vote.

[1]= After stone huts or buildings are abandoned, plants or animals could occupy them over multiple seasons and decades. But any roofs of stone or tiles would prevent sunlight from reaching indoors unless the whole space collapsed. Poking inside any space that's been abandoned is extremely hazardous since it's difficult to gauge how solid the structural integrity is after multiple centuries.

[2]= Or any ruins that have walls and platforms with no roofs used perishable materials instead of stone or clay for the upper levels. Most of the buildings in Pompeii were 2, 3 or even 4 stories high. Only the ground level was made of clay, cement, or stone while the upper levels were made of wood. Greek temples and stages often had wooden roofs instead of stone since it was less hazardous to move and repair.

[3]= Objects excavated from archaeological digs are organized into 3 groups: artefacts, ecofacts, and features. "Features" involve anything too large or heavy for an individual person to move or carry. Buildings, statues, and stelae (large stones engraved with messages or declarations) are features. While ecofacts or floral or faunal remains which are unmodified by people (animal bones, burnt wood, seeds and grain, petrified insects). Bones are often used to make tools (axes, arrowheads, flutes, a comb), human modifications which change them into artefacts.

[4]= multiple pieces of media reference SBS trivia, including the height and other measurements of varied One Piece, or Naruto characters. Height is one characteristic for all of them that is the most consistent no matter which source anyone looks for: Nami is 5' 7", Sakura as a 12-year-old was 4'10", and Naruto at the same age was 4'7".

Chronologically, Sakura and Naruto in "Growth through Chaos" are around the same months as the Chunin Exam preliminaries, accounting for side-missions depicted in filler or flashback scenes between the Waves Arc and meeting the Suna siblings. The timelines in Naruto have become a convoluted nightmare from filler and retcons, leaving these conditions open to interpretation.

Encounters and Introspection

Chapter 24: Encounters and introspection?

"...."=speaking.

'...'=thinking.

" *'Inner thoughts'* "=images or memories within somebody's head.

Please Read and Review, with detail.

Dawn broke over Lost Island, serving an alarm to wake up the slumbering Straw Hat Pirates. "Naruto, Sasuke, wake up," Between Naruto and Sasuke, somebody was ruffling their hair, coaxing the boys out of sleep. "Sen... sensei?" Yesterday came back in a rush and immediately Naruto knocked Kakashi over with a glomp. Even a smile even creased over Sasuke's face at having their sensei back.

"Alright, alright," the Jonin awkwardly chuckled, patting Naruto on his back. "I'm still here, but.... that collision with Garp took more outa me than Zabuza managed. Can you, help me to sit up?"

"Sorry, sorry sensei!" scrambling off, Naruto proceeded to yank the bigger man to a barrel then push or pull him up non-to-gently. Sasuke just shook his head, then a moment of introspection seized him. "Listen," Kakashi spoke to them both, "I want to get you and Sakura back to your training, immediately." Soon, Sakura was awake to and all three Genin were running laps over the water's surface side-by-side. Zoro was awake too and set into his own exercise routine, while Sanji was prepping breakfast for everyone.

"AAAAAAA! WOW!" Apis was awake now and gawking over the railing at the other pre-teens. "You three can stand, and run, on empty water?" "It never gets old, and quite a handy novelty," Sanji chipped in with a plate of toast and fruits in one hand. "Wait, did you not see them race up the cliff last night?" Usopp had come up after

donning fresh bandages and questioned Apis. "I didn't go and watch, I guess," the girl answered. "I just heard this chef, and the scary green guy went to race up a cliff, then came back."

Sanji nodded, while Usopp just made a shrug and stood there. Hoping from one foot to the other with his arms folded, the sniper's eyes swept from the running Genin to Zoro swinging large weights overhead, to Kakashi, and back again. The rest of the crew around them were stirring as well, all except Luffy from the snoring down in men's cabin.

"Usopp? Do you have some form of question for us?" Kakashi's prodding question froze his younger crewmate instantly. "Uh... uh. Yeah-Hey, where's Mr. Tattoo?" Usopp brought up, looking elsewhere to dance around something. "He never showed up at the party last night. We still gotta thank him for bringing Kakashi back."

"He's already left." Of everyone, Luffy was the one who'd declared it, shooting right up from below deck. "Really Don?" "How do you know?" Gin and Nami each asked him. "Yeah," the calm Luffy answered with a slight grin. "He came last night and said some stuff. Then thanks for the food, that he had friends waiting for him to catch up, and he left." Starring up something, Luffy duct and threw a grin towards the cook. "Sanji, what's there to eat?"

"Sandwiches. Luffy, just wait for a sec. until Nami-swan and Sakura eat first," the cook answered. Nami pursued her lips, wondering about the ominous spectre who'd helped them. "Why'd he only meet Luffy? And why bother asking us about him so much when he sailed away in the middle of the night?"

"It's his choice," Kakashi answered her without turning his face away from his students as they quickly came back in. "Sakura, Sasuke and Naruto..." Kakashi began, "In our last fight days ago in Loguetown. You all performed remarkably, yet all four of us fell short in that fight. Nobody underperformed, instead we wound up completely outclassed by our captain's.... juggernaut of a grandfather." Feeling sweat trickle down his neck, the seasoned

Jonin was not the only one terrified. Sanji and Nami each felt something trickle down their spines, Luffy paused with his mouth open around a hunk of meat and Zoro's grip on his weights made the pole wobble. "While I was with Mr. Tatoo," Kakashi continued, "I had some time and introspection for all of us."

"And me too?" Usopp had asked the question, turning pink and shaking once everybody's attention was on him. Kakashi's brow furled imperceptibly, then spoke.

"Once I can train again," the Jonin addressed his student. "I'm going to be joining you three, dialling up my own training much more than before. Against..." glancing over at Apis, who was looking over Lost Island without much of a care, Kakashi allotted to be careful over names. "Against that enemy, he could see or power through every jutsu I could throw out, and each one spent more of my chakra until it overtook me. I lost that fight for two reasons: fatigue, and assuming our enemy drew his strength from a Devil fruit."

Sakura and Sasuke were each nodding, recalling Garp swallowed by water or driven head-first through the ground by Kakashi, and emerging with just damp clothing on his own accord. Naruto was slower and just glaring forward, 'if we meet somebody that strong again soon, I'm gonna need a new jutsu. Something so big and bad it could stop the ugly Kyuubi.'

"We need to pick the right jutsu, too," Sasuke spoke up. "Outside of learning somebody can get powerful without a devil-fruit like that clown, or the hooker Naruto cut apart, or Captain," the Uchiha nodded towards Luffy.

"What Hooker?" Nami exclaimed, turning her gaze on Naruto who had confusion written on his face. "Oh," then he grasped, "that woman who tried killing Nami-nee when lightning stuck Captain Luffy? That's who you mean, Sasuke?"

The Uchiha gave a nod "The one wearing next to nothing, and Zoro-sensei and I couldn't cut her. Nice job beating her, dobe."

"Beat a woman!?" Immediately, two kicks struck Naruto, then Sasuke and both flew into a wall. "OW!" Shouting, Naruto pulled himself up first and spun around, where he found Sanji raising one foot high and twitching. "Don't think that I didn't hear that. One second I ain't looking, and the both of you deliberately harmed a gorgeous lady-how many pieces do I get to cut off you?"

The answer came courtesy of a haymaker. "He was protecting me!" Nami's exclamation sent Sanji to the ground, sliding until he collided with Naruto. Sasuke had stepped out of the way, leaving the other two in a heap. "No!" running over Nami dug Naruto out from under Sanji and gave him a look over from top to toe. "Sorry, sorry."

Kakashi had to blink at what went down, then put one hand on Sakura's shoulder. "Sakura, you began working on how to utilize our crew's fighting skills before sailing to Loguetown. Today, I want to see them and devise more... let's call them crew formations, to identify and maximize our advantages." A calculating, cool tone was seeping through Kakashi's voice.

"Hey, could-um-may-well-uh-uh-" beside the pair, Usopp was folding his mouth into several forms and trying to speak at the same time. "You... disagree, Usopp?" "No!" the sniper answered Kakashi. "I-well. Two heads are better than one. Why not Sakura and me do that together? Plan-out, maybe pick who works better together. Master-strategist Usopp, with the brilliant Sakura combined, no villain can foil our minds!" The boy was smiling, with his nose pointing high and both arms folding together.

"Make sure not to include more wasted moves, like Naruto's 'sexy jutsu,'" Sasuke slid in.

"Hey, my sexy-jutsu is great!" Speeding away from his sister, Naruto got right into Sasuke's face, yet before either him or the others could answer-

"No, it is not," Nami spoke flatly. "Did you forget what we spoke about that, little brother?" Naruto spun about, then tried daring to

argue but too many feelings erupted inside him to answer her. Instead, he gave a pout, pulling his arms closed in defeat.

"Anyway," Kakashi took over the matters again, "Sakura, you and Usopp, start brainstorming. Naruto, I had wanted to speak with you about that; and a few more subjects, one-on-one."

"Sasuke, I want you sparring with Gin and Zoro; two against one." Those instructions made Sasuke pause, actively not glancing to the more ruthless members present. He could hear one walking across to deck, and the other setting his weights down.

"Don' go putting 'em away yet, Zoro," Gin called over. "If we're runnin' intah more monsters, Ah'm gonna step-up some extra trainin' myself." Sasuke looked over, but Kakashi was already gone, moving over with Naruto and Nami, plus Sakura wasn't there either.

He and Usopp had already sat down together. "So let's see what the mighty, canny, and wily Usopp can conjure up. Smart tactical moves, like make distance and avoid fighting like Kakashi first said when we left Nami's village?"

"That's not our job, Usopp," Sakura claimed. "You, Zoro, Captain Luffy, Kakashi-sensei, and me and everyone all have different skills. I want to think-up ways to combine them, like in team-formations or how shinobi use cooperative-ninjutsu." An explanation of this followed, with both diving in for creativity, and the rest of the crew looking around; and giving Usopp more ideas.

Background sounds of Sasuke barely maneuvering between man-Demon Gin and Zoro, or Luffy hoping around to check on one person, then the next until he got close to Nami. "Hey, Nami, you wanna go somewhere and train like everyone, too?"

"Luffy, I'm..uh....." feeling Luffy's head nestled on her shoulder, a prickle spiked over Nami's lips. "Ah, no..um-" "Nami-nee, are you okay?" Naruto sped around Kakashi, kneeling close to his sister. "You're kinda turning red," as Nami's face took on a pinkish colour.

"You gotta fever? Let me feel your head." As one hand closed over the girls' brow, Luffy came around beside Naruto, and Sanji slid over, filling the girl's vision with all three boys. "Oh, you feeling sick, Nami?" "Sick, ill, can I cook you something coming my darling?"

"I'm fine. Naruto, uh-Sanji, you go and try teaching kicks to Luffy. I'm doing fine, really."

"You sure?" "Nami, oh Nami, must I?" Sanji was shaking in his shoe, recalling the last 'training' he'd done with Luffy before Loguetown.

But before anybody could go further, a low cacophony made everyone freeze, then the water and earth around the Merry erupted with thunderous impacts. Everyone braced, while a few sped around the find the source of the attack. "That was cannon fire!" "The Marines! Danger! Danger!" Usopp kept announcing into a megaphone. "Navy ships are coming! Navy ships are coming!" Sure enough, a pair of sizable battleships were approaching from the north.

"There's gonna close us in!" Nami exclaimed, sweating as the battleships were cruising closer to the mouth of the Bay they'd anchored within. Zoro and Gin merely pivoted, Kakashi cursed the state he was in. "Sanji, get Apis! When Mr. Tattoo and I found her, she'd just escaped from the Navy!" Straight away Sanji sped around and stood over the girl, who'd fallen to the floor at the first salvo. "Everybody get ready!" Luffy exclaimed, planting feet like a raging bull and glaring towards the ships. "Nobody's threatening us. My crew just got back, and we ain't splitting up again. Nami, Sail us outa here. Kakashi, think you can hit those ships with water jutishu?"

"Jutsu," Sakura corrected him. "Sorry captain," Kakashi announced, steadying himself on his legs. "I'm.... still too weak, from your Grandpa."

"Okay, I guess we gotta-"

A Pulse. Out of nowhere, some oppressive, intense sensation pulsed across the Merry in a wave. Pervasive over the air, even leaves swept out of trees from this force radiating over the island. Everyone onboard felt it, permeating through them like a solid wave. "Wh... what in..." "The hell was that?" "Huh?" Sanji, Zoro and Luffy in that order all reacted. Apis lost her breath at the sensation, Nami and Usopp let out gasps; and each of the Shinobi paused; feeling this sensation rippling through their chakra networks like shock. 'This... genjutsu... no.... what...?' Kakashi grasped how his entire chakra network felt rattled, and everyone caught their bearings.

"Hey! Hey everyone! The Marines are down!" Usopp announced from his spot as look-out. More of the crew cast their gazes out for the approaching threat. The warships were still sailing... right into each other as the noses of both ships met together. With that collision, ships stayed where they were, bobbing in the water. Several moments bent by, until Sanji brought a telescope to his eye and Usopp adjusted the scope on his goggles. "Whatever that was, it hit them too. Everyone aboard both ships are asleep."

"Now's our chance. Hurry and sail away." At Zoro's command, the entire crew did exactly that. Gin got to the helm, Nami set about directing them, Usopp kept his sharp eyes on the Marines, Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura had everything packed away or set to aiding Zoro and Sanji with the sails. Except Luffy, Kakashi, and Apis just stood there, staring out at the ships.

The Captain and the Jonin turned their attention back to the Island, where they picked out a figure standing in the shade of a tree to see them off. The silhouette's hood was close enough to be set towards the fleeing ship, where the two whom had noticed him answered with a salute and a wide smile. None spoke, Luffy still answering with his grin and Kakashi adjusting to a new enigma, 'What.... can that be a devil-fruit power as well? Or....' Whatever the answer, none came as the Going Merry fled Lost Island.

Eventually Apis came back out, right into heavy winds and storm building around the Island. "Draw the sails in, or we'll capsize!"

"Oh no.... I feel seasick," Sakura gulped. "Naruto, Sasuke, git up fast and tie the sails down." The Cabin-Genin followed Gin's directions, but $\frac{3}{4}$ er's up, Naruto lost his grip and fell. Kakashi snatched him out of the air. "Sakura, help Sasuke. And Naruto, you're getting additional chakra-control training."

"Rouge Wave!" Sanji announced. "Turn about, take it head-on," Nami commanded. More chaos ensured but the crew met it in an organized means until the Merry met calmer seas and came cruising through the mirage they'd flown through the day before.

"OOOOOO," Hey is that Warship-place, Apis?" Sure enough, at Luffy's question, everyone grasped the monolithic island on the other side of the mirage. "Hm-mmm. That's right. That is Warship Island, my home."

Sailing in, the crew took a breather in the calmer waters, except for Naruto. Kakashi stood watching him jog up and down the mast, then continue running around the ship's haul in one continuous circuit.

"Could that be too much," Nami came up beside Kakashi and asked. "After he nearly fell overboard. No," Kakashi deadpanned back to here. "But I wanna learn for Black-leg style, sensei," Naruto complained. "Sasuke's getting stronger with Zoro," he jerked a thumb over while running by, where Sasuke was doing deadlifts and squats with 20 kilos on each side under Zoro's watch.

Sakura, meanwhile, had her new bathing suit out and was sunbathing. Gin and Sanji had the ship under control and Luffy was in his favourite seat on the figurehead. "Wooo. Cool."

Closer and closer, the ship made its approach with the Jolly Roger clear on its flag and plastered over the main sail. Apis gave them directions on where to sail, right to a dock with homes and specs of people moving about, a reasonable village. "Everyone there has the same hat as Apis," Usopp announced with a spyglass to his eyes. "Th-th-they've seen us, too. Plenty are running indoors or gathering with weapons?"

"Why would they want to fight?" Luffy asked, with the Pirate flag directly behind him. Most of the crew staved off rolling their eyes, but none of the Cabin-Genin did.

"Pirates!" a command came over the water. "Sail away now. Try and attack, and we will kill you!" The crew readied for a fight, but after a few moments, no one followed up the threat. "Let's continue sailing in," Kakashi suggested. "Apis, would these people recognize you?"

"Heeeeey! Hey, everyone it's me!" The girl leapt up to the railing, waving both arms at the assembly. That provoked several reactions. Most of the adult either dropped their weapons or were shouting worried questions at Apis. The Going Merry continued cruising in until it was parallel with a dock and Zoro dropped anchor.

"Everyone, let's go," Luffy announced. Gin set the gangplank and a few at a time, the crew filled down with Luffy and Apis at their head. Standing before the crowd, with more residents behind them and the remaining poking their heads outdoors and windows, body parties kept staring and nobody said a word.

"Hey! I've got one question," Luffy called, with a serious look at the nearest person to him.

"Ah? What is that, pirates?"

"Are there any restaurants around here?" Nobody.... not a soul answered him. Sanji and Gin had to muffle scoffs at Luffy's priorities, while Sakura, Nami and Kakashi were more inquisitive. 'These people. Their hats do match the ones from that mural on Lost Island.'

"Apis?" An ancient, gravelly tone announced as an elderly man with grey hair hobbled forward on a chain. Still, Apis' face lit up upon spotting him and she broke into a run. "Grandpa Bokuden! Haha!"

"Why my granddaughter!" Seeing the pair reunite, any tension from the villagers evaporated and the Straw Hats moderately relaxed. "I had no word, and only worry since those horrid Marines took you."

"Yeah. But I got away from them. These people," she turned back to the Straw hats. "The guy with a mask and grey hair helped me out of a boat. Then these nice pirates agreed to help me come here."

"Nice Pirates?" More than a few of the crowd asked, dumbfoundedly. "Are all Marines kind?" From the Straw hats, Sasuke had stepped forward and posed the question. "If there are Marines that abduct a little girl, randomly and without reason. Why should kinder pirates be impossible?"

"We're a crew heading to the Grand Line but wound up in trouble, rallied, and Kakashi wanted Apis to make it to her home. So here we are."

"Please, please, there's no need to explain," Grandpa Bokuden answered him. "You have my thanks and have not made any threats or demands. Please, come ashore and be welcome."

With a shrug, that was that. Plus a promise of food got Luffy's attention. The crew collectively tied off the Merry. "Pull in the sails, an' tie our flag down as well," Gin suggested. "If more Marine are pokin' about, better not be simple to spot."

Nami and Zoro agreed, and the crew filled ashore. "Hold on," Sakura called, now with shorts and a t-shirt over her swimsuit. "Is there somebody who can cut hair in your village? I have money to pay if they can take of this," she gestured at the locks extending to the small of her back. With a few directions, the girl sped off, while everyone else continued to Apis' House.

Inside they heard more of Lost Island, long stories, and so much more until Grandpa Bokuden and Luffy each fell asleep. "These pork buns. They'll need an additional 5 hours to be ready, I'm afraid," Sanji announced. "Well, that's time I can spend training." "All of us can," Kakashi nodded at Zoro.

"And Naruto, will you come here?" In a blink, the boy was at Kakashi's side, "What is it sensei? Are you tired, hungry, thirsty, oh,

wait-wait-" "Naruto-" "Sensei, those books you like. They're still all on the Merry." Immediately, Kakashi felt a shiver start in his toes and migrating up to his head until he realised Naruto was gone and only the other crew were still in the house. 'I'll.... wait. For now,' Kakashi drew a notebook out and made a fresh page. 'Usopp asking about learning to fight, too. He's still trying to gain taijutsu, erm-, hand-to-hand, foot-to-hand-ahhh.....I sound like Guy.' Kakashi wrote a few ideas on the page under Usopp's name then moved on to another titled Sasuke. 'He's certainly dedicated to standing with Zoro, and Zoro himself is delivering on their... promise. But Ninjutsu is a true ace-in-the-hole for us against anybody with Devil-fruit powers. He's further ahead than either Sakura or Naruto, but I'm not letting anyone sit on a single option... Fire-style, earth-style, water-style, paper-bombs, the Hidden-Lotus, Chidori, ambushes, the list of jutsu that Monkey D. Garp blew through was coursing through Kakashi's mind.... we need more. All of us.'

"I'm back." Sakura's voice announced, drawing attention to her new hairstyle. One they immediately identified could trace to where it came from. Her pink locks were less than half if they had been, form a curtain around her neck with few strands between her cheekbones and ears, and bangs ending just above her eyebrows. Nami grew a pensive look, examining Sakura as the younger girl waited for the verdict. "Is this flattery?"

A blush from Sakura answered the question, copying Nami's sport-cut hairstyle and Usopp threw a thumbs-up behind her.

"Sakura," the jonin called to the girl.

"Yes, sensei?" "How far can you keep a plain leaf moistened with water?" At the question, she thought back through her mind. "Only a few millimetres in from my fingertips, sensei. I... I skipped it the first morning after you were gone. Oh, I should continue right now." Kakashi nodded, and a gentle hand came through Sakura's hair. "You're already taking important steps. And wise ones."

"Soak an entire leaf through. I want to start learning full water-style jutsu tomorrow." In a heartbeat, the girl was off, and the same moment she was out the door, Naruto came back in. "Got it! This is one you like the best, right sensei?"

"Icha-icha tactics." Immediately, Kakashi took the volume with reverence, even caressing the cover as he near-ceremoniously set it to one side. "Training." Immediately, Naruto went silent. "I have a new training regimen in mind for you. In between sleeping while I was with Mr. Tattoo, I was devising new training materials and methods for each of us to follow the... performance in our last fight."

The atmosphere inside grew a shade cooler for all the Straw Hats. Luffy, Gin, Nami, Usopp and Sanji each leaned closer, while Apis was somewhere else, and their host continued snoozing. "For now..." an idea piqued in Kakashi's head. "Nami, will you come here a moment?" Immediately, she was front and centre. "Naruto, please, make one shadow-clone. Nami, lean closer."

Rapidly there were two Naruto's inside, and the girl did lend an ear. After some instructions, she shrugged and moved for the door. "Naruto, uh, the clone one. Please follow me. But the real one, you stay in here." "Why Nami-nee/Why Nami-nee," each one asked in sync. "Just come with me, and only the clone one. Okay?"

Immediately that's exactly what happened. The door shut and footsteps kept the others informed how they were moving further away. "Sensei? What's my clone going with Nami got to do with training?"

"Wait," Kakashi answered him. "One moment... no. Naruto, count to 100," the instructor passed to him. "One hundred, slowly. Then you'll have an answer." Nodding, Naruto started counting, slowly, in a whisper not too loud that they could hear each number.

20.....31.....46.....56.....87..."Huh?" Both Naruto's eyes blinked in sync with a jerk of his head. "Sensei? I... what... I saw."

"Yes," Kakashi answered. "Everyone," he looked over the room to the rest of their crew. "Do you all remember in Loguetown. At select moments Naruto would announce what was happening at locations which he wasn't physically there at? Finding Marines? The Vice-Admiral punching him? Then learning Buggy, Alvida and Kuro's minions had taken our ship by exterminating the clones left aboard?"

Thinking over the moments generated time for Nami to walk back indoors. "Okay, what was that about?"

"Naruto," Kakashi fixed his eye on his student. "Who won?" "I did," and immediately Naruto shot to his feet. "And you owe me 20,000 berri, Nami-nee." "Huh? Wait-what, how can you-?" Nami spun on her little brother with her mouth open.

"Pay up," Holding two hands out, wearing a cheeky smile with closed lips, and what seemed to be tiny berri sighs in his eyes. Kakashi asked him for extra details. "Nami-nee had a game with me, rock-paper-scissors," Naruto recounted. "I made it for 10,000 berri. She complained but I talked about never passing up something that can net you more money. Then she smiled at me," a sly grin made Naruto resemble a fox with the final details in mind, "and made it 20,000, and I won, believe it!"

"Memory-transfer," Kakashi announced. "This is a peculiar component of the shadow-clone jutsu. You all already know-"

The door behind them slammed open, cutting off Kakashi as Sakura walked in. "Hey, will somebody talk sense into Sasuke?" Zoro was carrying his disciple over one shoulder. And the smell of Sasuke's sweat-stained clothes swept about the room. "More.... more, I can do more," the Uchiha growled. "Sheesh. If you're this spent, take it easy, why don't cha?"

"Draw some water, strip down Sasuke, and... take two hours to rest." Kakashi sighed, resting one hand on his head at the interruption. "Well, at least everyone is here, so there isn't any need for repeat instructions."

"Usopp, will you call Sakura inside for a moment? And... get a change of clothes for Sasuke." Twelve minutes later, the Uchiha's clothes were fluttering in the breeze outside while the owner was sitting in his boxers staring intently within fighting the instinct to shiver. Zoro had thrown him under a waterfall to meditate, and Sasuke had lasted six minutes before his lips were changing blue.

"As I was speaking," Kakashi drew the attention of his students and crewmates. "Sakura, please make one Illusion-clone. And Naruto, one shadow-clone." They both complied, and Kakashi established the differences between them. "You spoke of you before, Kakashi. Of water-clones, plain-clones, and shadow clones while we were sailing after Nami to Arlong Park," Sasuke reminded him.

"Good recall," Kakashi praised him. "But there is another component to Shadow-clones that I did not speak of. And one I'm going to have Naruto take full advantage of for training."

"Listen. Aside from functioning as a physical copy. Shadow-clones have a memory-transfer component behind them. Since they are composed of chakra from whoever generates them. When each clone dispels, any sensations the clone was subject to, sight, spoken, scent, hearing, or touch, will pop up in the original's mind."

"Nami, that is how Naruto knew what happened when I asked you both to play rock-paper-scissors. And we all know what came of it, so no weaselling your way out of owing money," with a finger waving towards the sly navigator.

"Ahhh-" the denial stopped in Nami's throat, her hands trembling at the idea of giving money away. "Shishishishishishi!"

"Guhahahahahahaha!" "Keep laughing, and I'll raise your debt by 400%!" The girl barked with ferocious zeal at Luffy and Zoro.

"What debt?" Luffy asked, and Nami immediately pounced on.....nothing. Nobody in the room owed her money; hence the girl spun around folding both arms in a huff.

"Sensei, if Naruto can do this, and with any of his clones, why didn't he notice it before?" Sakura enquired.

"He has" Kakashi continued. "Before you and Zoro arrived, I was listing examples. This function has made shadow-clones ideal for scouting before. But... with Naruto, I've put together another function."

"Everything a shadow clone experiences transfers into their maker's memory banks. It becomes part of them, and they recall it. So imagine utilizing clones, to learn skills. Naruto." Giving the Genin his full attention, the entire room grew dim in Kakashi's mind as Naruto became his sole focus.

"With the sheer volume that you can make, mixed with your considerable endurance and stamina. Each day I want you to have multiple clones working on the same skill. Imagine... one hundred of you all training in the same jutsu. Or the same kicks for Black-leg style. Or learning the same recipes. Then, at the end of the day, or say, three hours. The clones dispel and all of their training is absorbed into you."

Zoro and Sasuke each shot to their feet over this. Nami's mouth had become detached from her jaw at imagining the possibilities. Sakura's eyes were wide too, and then she and Sasuke each threw themselves at Kakashi. "No."

Without even hearing the demand, the jonin answered them with a look Sakura withered under, but Sasuke held firm. "Why? Why not?" he demanded. Then waited in silence.... silence....and more silence, patiently, to hear an answer. 'Not growling? No repeat? Patience?' Kakashi took note. He'd had several reasons ready for this inevitable response. But. 'How far has Zoro rubbed off on him?'

"Sasuke," Kakashi answered, "unveil your sharingans. And Naruto?" Looking at his blonde student, Kakashi adopted a more placative air. "Would you allow Sasuke to copy how to execute a shadow-clone. Only a single clone, then attempt to emulate it himself?"

""Uhh....." Naruto looked between Sasuke, their teacher, then back and forth between both. "Shadow-clones. Sensei, they're kinda my thing, ya know."

"Teach me, Kakashi," Sasuke offered. "I know I can't copy everything with these eyes. Not something that isn't ninjutsu. I shouldn't depend on it. Teach me." Now Kakashi was genuinely surprised. Grinning, he gently rubbed his head. "Well, with my chakra-levels, the cost would set my own recovery back by a day, at least."

"Little brother?" At Nami's interjection, Naruto felt a certain look under his adoptive sister's gaze. One he tried pouting back to for a full minute then slumped over. "Okay. Sasuke, watch." Crossing his fingers, Naruto waited until Sasuke had his eyes fixed on him. "Shadow-clone jutsu." A platoon of Naruto's popped into existence beside him, and Naruto stood back.

"Wait," Kakashi snapped out. "One. Trying and, only, make a single clone, Naruto." Confused, both Sasuke and Naruto looked between their sensei, then Sasuke towards Naruto while the blonde only gave a shrug. Bring his fingers back to the right position, Naruto obeyed once... thrice... and he got it right on the sixth try, with a single spare Naruto present instead of six, twelve or two.

Sasuke closed his eyes, processing the last attempt through his clan's kekkei-genkai, and brought his own fingers in an identical cross. "Shadow-clone jutsu."

In a puff of smoke.....what resembled a white, wavy, and heavily emasculated Sasuke materialized beside him. The original immediately dropped to his knees, barely stopping his face an inch from the floor. **[1]**

"This....is why," Kakashi answered without even waiting for the question. "For everyone else.... each jutsu that a ninja casts, we expend chakra. Maintaining certain jutsu can even demand more. Shadow-clones, since they're made of pure chakra, are one of THE most demanding techniques any ninja can learn or use. Naruto's

inherent chakra levels are so ridiculously high, well, you've all seen the number of clones he can make."

"OOOO, so it's like a devil-fruit? Why Naruto makes good copies, not rubber-wavy ones?" Luffy asked, dropping one hand in his palm. "Like rubber-wavy Sasuke?" "That ain't even close," Usopp spoke up, "Kakashi just explained it so simple, any idiot should be able to follow."

"And I guess you've never gave this kind of shadow-clone training for the same reason, Kakashi?" Zoro asked him. A nod was all it took, and with one glance at Sakura, the girl understood too. Gin was helping Sasuke get back to a sitting position and offered him water.

"Sasuke, do you see now?" Kakashi enquired. "And now by spending that much, I doubt you'll be able to risk any further physical training today. This isn't impossible for somebody else to use," the Jonin made a peace offer. "But the amount of growth your chakra-pool and chakra-control need to make to use shadow-clones is immense. Sakura, you as well." In the background, the girl gave a nod, utterly transfixed by what she had seen.

"Naruto," Kakashi gave his attention back to the awe-struck Genin. "I want to you make ten copies. Leave one with Sanji to practice Black-Leg style, while you take the other nine and attempt to cut leaves in half with your wind chakra." Sanji was by the door first, and everyone watched the orange hoard materialize outside and get to work.

"Hey Zoro, let's go play tag!" "What!" Zoro barked at Luffy's request. "Hahaha, oh yes, let's play. Oh please, please, please," Usopp came over, begging. "NO way how old are you," he growled. ""Besides, it's time for my late-morning nap."

Throwing his head back, the swordsman took a final glance at Sasuke, made a satisfied nod, then leaned back closing his eyes. "Awwwwwww. He's just scared he'll lose," Usopp teased back, immediately jolting Zoro awake. "That's not why, you jerk-face. Take that back." "Why, ya mad? Huh? ~Huh? ~Huh? ~" "I'm not mad-get

back here!" Usopp flew out the door, Zoro hot on his heels and Luffy chasing after them, with one arm thrown at another Nakama. "Come on, you too Gin."

"Wha'? No, not me." "Shishishishishi. Come on!" With that all four were gone from the house, leaving only Nami and Kakashi inside. "Hey, hey, one of us play too!" "Little brother, did you listen to Kakashi?" Nami went out the door too, leaving only Kakashi alone inside with a sleeping Grandpa Bokuden. "Wait, where is Apis?" Kakashi realized the one who'd been their ticket to this island was absent. Looking around, he picked up something else that was absent, too. Shuffling to the kitchen, Kakashi discovers the pork buns that had been cooking were gone and picked up Apis' scent leaving a back door from the house. "Kakashi?" Nami was back inside, and Gin was with her, after escaping the 'game.' "Awe... why'd that tiny gal take lunch and run?"

"A good question," Kakashi drew one arm at the treeline just yonder from the house. The trio departed the trail, moving a tad slow for Kakashi to keep track of the scent over winding pathways. Out from the house, further up the iconic mountain, Gin paused to stare at the Warship silhouette the natural feature cut, and Nami beside him. 'Did Millennial Dragons really fly along those cliffs, at one time?'

"Here." Kakashi's call yanked their attention. To a slight ravine with steep cliffs, and a rope-swing further beyond. Kakashi hobbled to one smooth rock nearby, setting his crutches aside and weaving his fingers through intricate patterns. "Earth-style: mobile-core." Planting both hands on the stone near his hips, soil and stone beneath the trio made a soft rumble. Then extending from their side, a solid mass of earth gradually mode to connect with the opposite side. At the end, Kakashi was sweating and could not rise to his feet without help. Once Gin had him draped over his shoulders, they cross over to follow a well-beaten trail more than any scent now.

On, and on, and on, and further. "I think we're on the other side of the island, now." "I wouldn't bet against dat, Nami," Gin nodded to

her. A tad further along, the trio identified a nature cave beyond three dense bushes.

"Why do ya think Apis would nab lunch then high tail it out here?" Gin enquired. "Let's have a look inside and find out." Nami was the first to move in, with the men behind her venturing into the shadows. Stalagmites flanked both sides of a winding path while undisturbed stalactites above appeared threatening to pierce them at any moment. Further inside, to multiple surprises, they hear a familiar voice. "Yes, they're real, real kind. So everything turned out fine." It was Apis, and something with her was munching.

"No, these pirates aren't scary at all. Mr. Tattoo knew so much, and Mr. Kakashi has been really good to me. I'm sorry, but we found Lost Island and the Dragon's nest wasn't there. Mr. Tattoo stayed to see more, but the Marines arrived and if the Nest isn't there nothing else on the island could help me. I'll not giving, though. There's got to be a way and I'll find it, I promised."

"You got a friend up here, little gal?" Gin called over. Apis whirled about with fear plastered on her face. "Stay back! Stay there! No! No closer!" both her arms spread over something. Hints of green were poking from around a bend in the cave. None of the party, not Nami, Kakashi nor Gin moved. "It's okay," Nami tried placating her. "If you want to hide something, don't worry. We saw you ran off with all the food though.... oh....."

Adjacent to Apis, something was moving in the shadows. "Girl watch out!" Gin made a bolt forward, still holding Kakashi's arm over his shoulder. And the moment he was around the bent the pirate's feet planted to a stop. Both men, the pirate, and the ninja, got a full view of what Apis had been hiding and each froze, losing most of their senses. Gin lost his grip on the Kakashi, barely catching him when the Hatake's knees met the floor.

"Hey what is....." Now everyone had their attention on it. On the Elephant in the room.

On the massive feather form of a beast occupying the centre of the cave on a bed on Straw, with Apis before it and munching through a bag. The creature was enormous, towering above them but noticeably smaller than Sea-kings. And it matched the images Nami had spied all over the village on Lost Island the day before.

"Ahh..hhh.... hh.....hh... hh..." Gin's eyes were the size of dinner plates and could only croak. While Kakashi had lost all composure. 'A.... a millennial Dragon That's only what this can be.' Then, he picked up that the creature's eyes were moving, between Gin, Nami and him.

"It's alive? A live Millennial Dragon?"

"Buda-buda-buda-buda-buda.... buda-buda-buda-buda-click. You guy's! We found a mil-erm.....something!" Nami's voice announced, conveyed through a snail on Sanji's wrist. "Nami-swan? Are you not still inside the house?" Around Grandpa Bokuden's house, Sakura and ten Naruto's still held leaves between their fingers, with an eleventh clone stood by Sanji. Usopp and Luffy stood close after game, and Sasuke was asleep indoors with the elderly man.

"Gin, Kakashi and me found Apis was gone, and she'd taken the pork-buns with her. There's a pathway behind the house. Follow it up to meet us, and fast!"

"You in trouble, Nami-nee?" Naruto's roar, multiplied to eleven with each clone, sent birds fluttering in panic. "We're coming, believe it!" As one, every clone broken into a run, seizing somebody to pull along while the original and one more ran into the house. "Naruto, I was getting-" "Uh-Kid-!" "Naruto-!" Zoro was not happy with the rude awakening. Usopp and Sanji tried to find their own feet, tripping over themselves and the clones, one before the other, and landing in a heap. The rest tore through the yard, where two more carrying Sasuke and the snoozing Grandpa Bokuden joined them running up a pathway. Luffy just kept laughing left and right:

"Shi~shi~shi~shi~shi. Get up for adventure, men! Nami found a mystery-thing!"

Charging on, ascending higher and higher up the island, the hoard bent right and left, tearing through thin brush, then came skidding to a stop. They stood before one earthen bridge extend over a ravine.

"Hey Luffy?" Sanji asked, jabbing a thumb at the gap. "Give us another one?" "Right. GUM-GUM," the captain curled his arms and legs in, ready, and willing to throw a: "Suspension-bridge."

Two Naruto's tore over first, yet the Luffy-bridge bounced on their last step, and both met the other side face-first. The rest cautiously shuffled over the Luffy-bridge, "Hey, who stood on my hat!" "Sorry, Luffy!" Sanji answered. They did have to carry two people over before Luffy could get back up: the sleeping Grandpa Bokuden and nearly naked Sasuke, dress in only his shorts.

"G-g-g-g-g-Grandpa?" Apis was really sweating now, under the watch of her blood relative. Bokuden's gaze kept shifting between her, to the Millennial Dragon, back to her, and again. Beside the old man, Usopp's mouth and tongue spilt out over his toes, Sakura was on her knees in awe and Zoro was more tense than anyone else. Sanji's teeth had bitten through a cigarette with his visible eyebrow twitching, but Sasuke was only glaring at somebody.

"OOOOoooo. So cool!" "Wow oh wow." Luffy and Naruto were both examining every part of the Millennial Dragon they could see and touch. Especially Naruto until, "Little brother," Nami scrambled forwards as the knucklehead duct beneath some part of Grandpa Ryu. "That hole might be this thing's butt!"

"Go ahead and let him crawl up it," Sasuke growled, with both his arms crossed over his bare chest in the dank cave. "Be strong," Zoro, habitually, scolded him. "If getting caught with your pants down-stops you, why bother learning to use a sword?" [2] More than a few people made incredulous faces at that tidbit. "Sanji, help

Nami," Kakashi spoke, and the cook materialized at the navigator's shoulder. Three moments passed and both came back around steering a pouting Naruto beside to others, with Sanji slipping his black coat off to drape over Sasuke.

"Apis, please come down right now." Grandpa Bokuden snatched everyone's attention by advancing before the Millennial Dragon. The Majestic creature barely noticed him, and neither did the human Grandpa hold his attention on him. Gradually, the girl slid down and strode up like an inmate to their sentencing. "Grandpa Bokuden?" Looming over her, the elderly man gather himself and sat down, meeting Apis at eye-level.

Before anything else could happen, a Dragon's tongue slid over Bokuden from head-to-toe, and its beak closed over his head. "Help, Grandpa Ryu's kinda senile!" Apis exclaimed, trying to pull one away from other. "He sometimes forgets what is food and what isn't. Grandpa Bokuden sat down too close!"

"Now you tell us?" Sanji and Nami tried helping her, while Luffy ran right for one massive eye. "Gum-Gum-eh?" Mid-way to a punch, Luffy stopped short and kept starring at they eye. "Captain, what is it?" Sakura asked.

"Hey. You.....you ain't eating food, right now," Luffy spoke at the dragon, which immediately released the elderly man. Zoro and Gin shot forth, steering both Apis and Bokuden away while Luffy remained and was patting its head. "Good Birdie."

"He's a Millennial Dragon not a bird!" Apis exclaimed, indignantly. "Be nice and polite."

"Hey, let's see if he can fetch." Naruto suggested. "Or fly and get the stick, ya know."

"He's/It's a Dragon not a Puppy!" While Nami and Sakura barked simultaneously, Apis came darting up beside Luffy but stopped short as well. "Huh?"

Silence ensued between all three, leaving the onlookers lost. "You wanna go home?" Luffy asked. "Home?" Usopp asked. "Uh, yeah, yeah, home. Left get back to Merry and sail to my house and hide!"

"Sure," Luffy kept talking. "Luffy agrees. Super. Everyone, by command of captain Luffy and captain Usopp, RUN!" The sniper spun around to break into a sprint, but two guys seized him by the shoulders, leaving Usopp's legs spinning in circles in empty air.

"Really? It's really gonna happen tomorrow?" Luffy was growing excited. His attention still transfixed on the Millennial Dragon, ignoring the confoundment of his crew.

"Luffy, you can understand Grandpa Ryu?" Apis asked bewilderedly, as were Nami, Kakashi and everyone else around. Luffy only grinned over at her. "But I can hear him easily with my devil-fruit. How can you?" the girl continued.

"I just can," Luffy answered with a shrug. "All the things that he says. I can just hear it." "But how?" Apis repeated herself. "Heck if I know," the rubber-man shrugged, laying one hand on his hat then fixing both the girl and the dragon with a happy grin. "I'm excited now. The Dragon's Nest really is coming tomorrow like old guy said."

"Captain Luffy?" Kakashi spoke-up, very, very cautiously. "Leave it for now, whipper snapper." Beside him, Grandpa Bokuden was back on his feet and came up beside his granddaughter and Luffy. "Apis? I take it this was why those marines seized you? Yet you have kept this secret of our people safe?"

Apis made a bashful grin, slowly nodding her head and resting one hand on Grandpa Ryu's snout. "Yeah, that's just what happened. Sorry I stole all the pork-buns, but Grandpa Ryu was hungry. He's still lost so much of his energy, he can't even move out of the cave, and I'm scared if he does that Marines might see him and do something real mean."

"Wait. Kakshi-sensei said something about this." Sakura recalled, pulling everyone's attention to the girl. "Apis, did you ask the Marines about this Millennial Dragon, and they kidnapped you?" "Yeah, that's right," Apis confirmed Sakura's enquiry, simple as breathing. "You see..." the girl started from the beginning. Of how she'd gained her devil-fruit, then heard Grandpa Ryu's voice one day. And of how he was indeed a Millennial Dragon searching for the Dragon's Nest. "Wait.... he's, this real big guy... he's lost... a way back..." Naruto's question broke a touch, inching closer to his sister. "This dragon doesn't have a way back home?" the Uzumaki's tone was forlorn, and he was the only one either, Sakura's lips were in the shape of an "o" as her hands slowly drew closes, wringing her fingers together. Sasuke was forcing his eyes sideways to bottle up a spark of sympathy. They were not alone, however: Kakashi slid on hand over Naruto's shoulder and the other on Sakura's, lending a reassuring squeeze, while Sasuke felt something nudge his hip and found Zoro standing close and staring straight ahead, lending a silent support the younger boy did not recoil from.

"Grandpa Ryu's sure the Dragon's Nest is coming back," Apis wrapped-up her story. "Like I said, the problem we have is he doesn't remember exactly where it is. And that's why I was so excited when you all disappeared yesterday on Lost Island."

"I thought Lost Island and the Dragon's Nest was one and the same," the girl continued. "I've been searching for a way to find it, through old records, studied ancient maps, but even the legend itself doesn't have any clues. So-"

"My girl!" An irate bark stopped her short, and Grandpa Bokuden was glaring. "Did you truly not listen to the stories I spoke of so often? Old I may be, the legend holds true details. Why, oh why did you ask somebody else instead of reaching out to family? As I have said a hundred times the first king of Lost Island was King Iskodok, who had three sons, his first son was Isohontus and his second son was Hokbonbo and the third was Hokebokehan. One day the king

said to them 'Now list to me and obey, go find the tree of God and the Dragon said to me-'"

"This is why....!" Apis moaned, nearly pulling her hat off yet Grandpa Bokuden just continued reciting the long history of Lost Island.

"Grandpa Bokuden, please STOP!" "Wha?... Apis do you not wish to aid this Millennial Dragon and find Lost Island?" Grandpa Bokuden questioned her sternly, while behind him Usopp had fallen asleep on his feet mid-stride, Nami and Sakura were still listening, and the rest had their attention.....on a snoring Millennial Dragon.

"I found Lost Island already, we all were there," Apis explained.

"Ohh!" Sakura exclaimed, with excitement in the tone. "So. So those must be what we saw. Nami-san," she spun around locking eyes with the Navigator. "Of course!" Nami realized. Before anyone could ask, the girls launched into their own recount of the trek up Lost Island to find Luffy, including how they'd met Kakashi and all the statues, high reliefs and murals that adorned the ceiling of a temple on Lost Island.

"Now yah mention it," Gin nodded, "This big guy does resemble 'em a little. But ain't so much they'd be one-to-one identical."

"Maybe it was embellished with time," Nami offered. "You know, so many years went by that anyone who'd seen a Millennial Dragon grew old and died. The rest just continued copying a design, or one artist would add their own flare and new models copied them. It led the image to evolve until something totally new was created." Sanji, Sakura and Kakashi each pondered this possibility, while Apis took the chance to speak up.

"Maybe, but on that mural inside the big place, all the Dragons were in the Sky and there wasn't any hint that Lost Island was the Dragon's Nest. Grandpa Bokuden, I'm sorry," the girl had her head bowed and both hands folded before her towards her family member. "You see, I tried listening to your story, but... I never heard any hints about where the Dragon's Nest is, and from what Mr. Tattoo, Mr.

Kakashi and these pirates found on Lost Island, it isn't the spot Grandpa Ryu is looking for."

Somebody was glaring hard, searching through her mind and her memory, while the rest had their attention on the residents as the elderly one also frowned into empty air. Grandpa Bokuden continued frowning, until his eyes were wide and soft, then he knelt between Apis and the Millennial Dragon. "I am sorry now, my sweet one. I recall that I wrote these stories down once, then engrained so deep in my head, indeed where the Dragon Nest is located is a special secret which had been hidden quite deeply."

"Huh? Y-y-y-y-you really do know?" Awe and excitement lit up Apis' face. "Really? We could help this big, nice, green Dragon get home?" Naruto was just as excited as she was.

"Good!" Luffy answered of all of them. "I wanna see this Dragoon Nest and met more of them when they get here."

"Yeah, but first we need to figure out where that is. After one thousand years, for all we know the island got swallowed by the s... the....!" Nami's words grew quiet as they slid away and pieces of a certain puzzle in her mind were fixing together. Sakura was doing the same, while Kakashi slid back to wait and think on a wider scale. 'Just as Dragon spoke about. But with the Marines so close, will they arrive and threaten not only this... Grandpa Ryu, but more Millennial Dragons as they arrive?'

"THAT'S IT!" Immediately, a loud, ear-splitting screech tore through the cave. It even shocked the senile Millennial Dragon's eyes wide. Everyone's attention was on Sakura. "The Dragon's Nest isn't 'lost' Apis, Nami declared, scurrying over the girl and her human grandfather. "Mr. Bokuden, please, come over with Sakura and me. Tell this story, slowly. We want the last piece because on Lost Island, there was a huge mural that showed precisely where the Dragon Nest is, and something that might occur again any day now."

Both girls launched into describing details of the large dome where the reunion with Kakashi took place.

"The Dragons were assembling in one space, not on either island but between them. That must be where they witnessed the nest, but instead of always present above the surface, it's beneath the water-level down under the sea." Nami summarized.

"Their name is a double meaning, then." "Double meaning? What's that, Sakura?" Naruto's excitement had been building with the rest of the group, but not so much that he failed to notice something.

"Sasuke? Where are you leaving to?" The Uchiha wasn't where he had been, and neither was Zoro; both walking for the cave entrance.

"This could be real, real cool, ya know."

"It's a place, and for once one coming to us." the Uchiha replied.

"Sakura was brilliant. Like with Arlong after the restaurant she pieced together where we're going again, so we only need to wait here."

Behind him, a solid thump announced somebody hit to the floor.

Turning around the swordsman and his apprentice, plus everyone else, found Sakura flat on her back, with her eyes swirling around and lips twisting in a grin.

"Sasuke.... brilliant.....me.....Sasuke.... brilliant.....me.....," dazingly, the cabin-kunoichi kept mumbling with a dopey smile on her lips. Gin could only stare, while Sanji had a playful smirk at the hint as Luffy crawled up, lightly poking at Sakura. "Sakura. Sakura. Is my ninja okay or something?"

"You all stay here and learn," Zoro offered to them. "I'm taking Sasuke to get some actual clothes on, then we'll be meditating. Oh, and watch out for more of the Marines. The girl mentioned they took her, and we had dumb luck getting away from two battleships this morning. Maybe they're after this Dragon so.."

"Don't you mean 'the' Dragon, Zoro?" Gin's interjection stopped the first-mate short. "And if ya want to get clothes for Sasuke, shouldn't they be down this mountain, not further up?"

Zoro froze mid-stride, curled both his hands into fists on a pathway opposite to how they'd come to the cave. They suddenly stopped short as a low rumble grew echoing about from said cave.... from multiple stomachs.

"Oh, sorry!" Apis' apologized, bowing her head at the embarrassed and hungry pirates. "You've all been so kind and helpful. I'll head back down and make dinner for all of you right now." "Hey, how about you let me help too!" Apis and Naruto sped out from the cave, with one calling back over his shoulder. "Follow up back down, Sasuke and Zoro. That way you got mind up lost with moss-head-first mate."

"Hey, what you say, brat!" Zoro tore offer, with Sasuke in his wake and all four left the others where they had been. "Heh, I hate to admit it, but Mr. Lost-a-lot is right," Sanji spoke up, lifting a fresh cigarette to his lips. "And worse, those Marines on the ships we left behind might find their way to Lost Island, too. Some might either investigate the island, or if we're lucky they'll come straight here."

"Let's set-up a watch, then," Gin ventured. "Somebody up here, and another in the village down below; ensure we ain't caught unawares?" "Oh, great idea. I, ahh...." Usopp had been listening, yet instead of volunteering his eyes travelled over the others present: Sakura mumbling in a daze about Sasuke, Nami and Kakashi listening to Bokuden (and trying to stay awake), and Luffy sitting beside the dragon.

"Hey Sanji, can I, kinda ask you something?" Curious, the cook did a mental tally of his priorities 'Apis, Nami, Sakura, Naruto... all check, food with the plain cooks, no threats...' "Hey, Luffy."

"Whaa? Something up, Sanji?" the captain answered. "We're keeping watch for any Marines that might come searching for the Dragon. You and Gin keep watch up here, Usopp and I are heading for the ship. Don't leave Nami-swan or Sakura alone up here." "Okay." With that they split up, Usopp walking down and trying to piece together a request in his head. Luffy walked outside beside

Gin, who nodded to his captain and worked-out a rough schedule to keep lookouts in shifts.

Part-way walking down the mountain, Usopp broke his request to Sanji. "When Sakura and me got planning, she talked of this collaborative jutsu. Like, moves two ninjas use, combing them into a bigger, better move. Some ideas I have, I mean, you fight up-close with kicks, and you always got a lighter around for smoking. I got a few ideas to try out, jutsu you and me, Sanji."

The chef tapped one pocket to ensure he still had his lighter. "Makes sense. Plus, since you use a slingshot, either of us could set-up one opponent for the other to take out."

That reassured Usopp, lending some confidence for the other reason that he had. "And..I got something else I want to ask, too." The Sniper swallowed back a lump in his throat, then imagined his capture, Luffy stepping up to fight, and his own Dad; Yasopp of the Red Hair pirates.

"I want to do some training, too. Like, how you were training Naruto back down at the house."

Mid-day became afternoon, with the sun between day and evening when Kakashi and Nami strolled down from Grandpa Ryu's cave. "How on earth did you stay awake, between the older man's mumblings?" At Nami's question, Kakashi just gave a tilt of his head. "Hm. Did you say something?" one double-take and a near-trip later, Nami answered the question by glaring with a pout.

"Never mind, I'll just tell Naruto you left me upset." The older man shrugged, setting a terribly slow pace down the hill, and opening a tiny snail on his wrist. "Buda- buda- buda- buda- buda... buda- buda-click. Kakashi, you spot something?"

"No, no, all clear, Zoro," the jonin answered. "Nami and me as strolling down from the cave. Gin is still up there, and I assume you

and Sasuke remain on the Going Merry. Are Naruto, Sanji or Usopp with you."

"Nah, we've been training, Kakashi," Sanji voice came in over the baby den-den. "Usopp came to me, but Naruto and Apis have been inside the house, cooking. Come on down, I'll make my way up and relieve Gin. - *BANG!*"

The snail hollered. Before somebody could ask, a lighter rumble came over the pair from the direction of Grandpa Bokuden's home. "What was that?" "Something exploded, Nami-swan," Sanji gave an answer. "Moss-head, did you fall asleep and somebody sneak-up with a cannon?" "I'd never-" "Hey, N-Naruto? Why are you covered with smoke?" Between three voicing coming through the snail, Nami had heard enough and took off. Kakashi was moving behind her too, in the perfect spot when Nami got to the narrow ravine. Skidding to a stop, her toes were over the edge and a little wobbly, until something seized Nami and swung over the gap; Kakashi had taken a rope swing and snagged Nami on the way to deposit on the other side.

Soon came approaching the house to find light smoke billowing from windows with Naruto and Apis outside covered with soot. Neither said anything since Sanji spotted them first and gave an answer. "Apis and Naruto were cooking together."

"Yeah. Come on in, and then call the others down, too." Apis cheerfully gave an invite. "Naruto's got some good ideas, and got me to try some new things, too." Her partner beside her was grinning too, Naruto even more excited for some people to try his cooking.

"You... sure you followed the recipe right, little brother?" Nami asked cautiously, while Usopp came hobbling a tad closer to her and Kakashi. "Something inside there exploded, half the pans or plates got scorched, and they've been in there together for hours," he whispered. Kakashi mentally cataloged that, and took in the younger boy's state; bruised, shaky legs, dirty hands, and sweating.

"Awe, dinner?! Who's got food?" Luffy had arrived, rubbing his hands together as a low rumble made his stomach shake. "You might want to taste this first, Luffy," Usopp called over at him. Inside, certain words wound-up prophetic. "dinner" was bowls of noodles, vegetables thin and unevenly cut, with blacked chunks floating among them in broth the colour of sulphur.

"You... both, really made this all by yourselves, Naruto?" "Yup, Nami-nee, believe it. Apis-Naru, pork special Ramen," the Uzumaki proclaimed. "I did the noodles myself. Apis and I kept arguing about the vegetables, but she did them in exchange to let me handle the noodles and spice. He didn't have any eggs, though, and we mixed all kinds of spices to make sure everyone got full flavour."

"Sanji-senpai, what do you think?" Both children were holding a bowl up to the chef. Sanji himself looked between it, to their faces, the horrible mess sprayed around the kitchen, and a stack of pots in a sink. "Food? ~food~food~food~"

"You honestly expect us to eat this, dobe?" Sasuke and Zoro had joined them. Nami answered one by kicking his shins and forcing a spoon in his hand. "It's... real thoughtful. What did you mix for the broth?"

"I boiled water," Naruto answered, "just like making Ramen at home. Then mixed in a lot of sea-salt and turmeric. We cooked-up the noodles separately, then I got dipping them in a marinade, but we didn't do anything with the pork until something went boom."

"It sure-hmmmm-tastes good." Luffy was munching down on the black bits, and Nami took up a spoon. Everyone cautiously followed them both and tried some....

5 minutes later five Naruto's sat around Luffy, stuck swallowing one dangerously spicy or strange bite after the next.

"What went wrong? Cheff Zeff would be furious at me." "How I make something so bad after you all have been so kind?" Naruto and Apis

were both bemoaning in a corner. Not even Nami could wear a white lie over how the food was, and Sanji had some kind of notebook in his hand. "You should know his rule about wasting food, too." Sanji hand threatened to make everyone eat the meal, even though he confessed the attempt was horrible on so many levels. 'He's better than my first try, and he volunteered to eat the rest. The Geezer had to force me. And for Naruto to learn how to cook..'

*"Take Naruto and teach him, not just about fighting by cooking, too. If someone cooks great meals, it's impossible for anyone not to like them. Food brings everyone together.".....*I gotta deliver on that. But I let Naruto take free rein in kitchen too early. That's not how I learned, and cooking isn't something that can just be taught.' Looking across the kitchen, or what was left of it and any tools useful to make food edible, Sanji made several mental notes. Once the last of the food was down somebody's mouth, Naruto got put to work on the clean-up. "But cooks never had the clean-up at Baratie, senpai."

"We're not at Baratie and look at the state of this kitchen. Somebody let you utilize their kitchen space, and you'd consider leaving them with this warzone?" "Then what about-"

Sanji tapped his foot, once, twice, and Naruto continued insisting on more help. Everyone except Luffy and Nami made for the door, then heard the kick landing on somebody's head.

"One more excuse, and no new jutsu or kitchen work at all. And I'll throw the Ramen noodles overboard." Apis had stayed inside to help too, leaving Usopp, Zoro, Sasuke and Kakashi outdoors. "Sasuke, head up to the cave and relieve Gin. Usopp and I'll watch from the going Merry and put a... remedial meal together."

"Why not take the pervy-cook with ya?" Zoro asked him, and immediately got an answer. "No shadow-clones. On your own, with only two hands-Naruto." Sanji's shout came with another echo of somebody kicked in the head. "Does anyone wish to enjoy Apis-Naru Ramen again?" Nobody answered, and Zoro strode off towards a tree. "I'm gonna take a nap. Wake-me for look-out duty later,

Sasuke." Said apprentice promised, then took off. Usopp and Kakashi left for the shore and their precious ship. Once aboard Usopp sagged down on a crate to rest his sore muscles.

(Usopp and Kakashi about fighting)

"So, was Black-leg style far more challenging than you imagined?" Bolting back upright, Usopp stared over at Kakashi's back, while the man was preparing food. "You, uh, nah, nah, Sanji had nothing but praise for me. And... you sure you can cook something edible, Kakashi?"

"Oh, I paid attention while in the kitchen with Zeff. And long before that in our home." Answering while he paired fish out of their fridge with a knife. Silence followed between them for hot minute. "Lying is a dangerous practice towards combat, Usopp. Telling lies to an enemy is a cleaver choice, but if you had to match my back against a hostile Pirate crew or entrust you to guard our ship with a false idea of what you can do, then both will be come lost." A knife sliced clean through one fish, with trails of blood and offal clean to see.

Usopp gulped, feeling his consciousness pressing hard on his skull. The impulse to lie again dried-up like piss in the desert, leaving a stale and rancid stain in his mind. "I-I-I-I-I just gotta...."

"Stop." Kakashi's one eye met the aspiring sniper's, welcome instead of condemning. "Tell me honestly. Or... why did you ask Sanj about trying to learn in the first place?"

Both hands on Usopp's knees were trembling, betraying the fatigue in his arms and legs that spoke loudly to anyone with a trained eye. "Because you and the other Genin know. And Loguetown was all my fault."

Moments after he spoke, Usopp felt his throat tighten but still did not cease speaking. "Kuro was from my village, and he tried to kill me, to kill Kaya, and now Luffy all because of me. Then you got caught saving me, and I couldn't do a single thing. Luffy beat Kuro, Zoro cut

his crew down, when Don Krieg came Sanji, you, Naruto and Luffy all had these big, important fights. If you'd lots more woulda been hurt, and then in Nami's village all I did was get shot and sit out the important part. How can-I-should-" Now he was almost choking on his tongue, and fighting off tears, wallowing in self-contempt.

Kakashi didn't move, instead he set the knife aside and just stood there, waiting. And waiting. Usopp remained quiet, breathing in gaps, and blinking as he grappled with his own frustration. "I'm too weak... then Luffy and you... you both coulda died. Because of me." With a gasp, Kakashi could see tension leaking away from his companion.

"Kakashi, I-" "Finish that sentence, and I may either kill you, or find a devil fruit and drop you in the ocean." Kakashi had a hint at what Usopp intended to speak. "First. Tell me about this, Kuro."

That did surprise the sniper. "Oh. That's right. You hadn't met us yet, and I guess nobody told you." The story about butler Klahadore, of Usopp meeting Luffy, Zoro and Nami, then their fight with Black Cat pirates was short and concise.

"You think you accomplished nothing, by defeating this, Jango, to save three children and somebody you care about?" An honest question, and one that left somebody's tongue tied into knots. Kakashi had not finished either. "As I recall, you lent covering-fire for us when Don Krieg attacked, right before Mihawk sliced their galleon in two. Then you stepped into danger when a certain Rat so much as threatened Sakura and Nami's sister-oh. Sorry, Nami and Naruto's sister, Nojiko. Do you recall that?"

"I... I guess. But I still sat-out the biggest win our crew had," Usopp tried to excuse the complements. "I barely did anything when Buggy and that Lady came at us one night. And Kuro led all of you into a trap just to save me." This time, Kakashi did not allow silence to last between them.

"Usopp. Why did get an idea to leave this crew behind?" At Kakashi's question, Usopp's entire mood changed. "Because I was too weak. I-

I-I got all of you in a trap, then you had to stay behind because of me. An-and-and I'm not a brave warrior or a strong fighter like the rest of you. Sakura can get invisible and she's a great thinker. Sasuke, Naruto, Zoro, and Sanji can't wait to charge into every fight they find. You and Jin are scary and ruthless. And Nami spent so long sacrificing for people in her home."

Slumping over, Usopp was making a mental list of what he could take with him and plan a way back to Syrup village. "Why did Luffy invite you?" Kakashi had to ask twice to get Usopp's attention. "What was that?" "Why did Luffy invite you? I haven't known him as long," Kakashi confessed, "but I do recall how he will not take no for an answer after deciding for somebody to join him. So, why... why did Luffy ask you on to his crew in the first place?" Kakashi had almost added 'out of anyone else,' but caught his tongue on a bad taste in his mouth.

Thinking back, and a little mentally raw to conjure-up a misleading narrative, Usopp remembered more from Syrup Village. Of Luffy talking about Yasopp, his dad, and how immediately both clicked together. Of rolling down and hill where-'oh, right, Luffy only wanted the Merry, not me.'

"This ship," the boy answered him. "Kaya heard Luffy, Nami and Zoro wanted a ship, so she and Merry gave Merry to-ahh. Merry, and the Merry, I got myself confused." Shaking his head and holding both hands to his head, Usopp got back to his story of how the Going Merry became a pirate ship.

"Why are you telling lies, Usopp." Somebody else spoke-up. Zoro was in the doorway and walking inside. He stopped close enough to loom over Usopp with both arms crossed. "The way I recall, you were rolling down hillside with a giant pack. Luffy and I stopped you, you talked about becoming a pirate and tried walking the other way. Then Luffy asked why you weren't aboard with the rest of us to go sailing."

This broke through the illusion Usopp's old habit had conjured-up in his mind. He kept looking inward, so much that he wasn't listening to why Zoro had walked inside the Merry on his way 'up' the mountain.

'Luffy... mind "' *We're friend's right. So come on.*" And then... then I made a flag... and-' then he was shaking. "Usopp!" Zoro had one hand on his shoulder, try to shake sense into him. "If you think about leaving then Luffy won't let us set sail until you come back. Did you forget Luffy kept trying to run back after Kakashi left, and we had to force-feed him until after flying to the strange Lost place? And you did help us in Loguetown, by pointing Luffy's crazy Grandpa at Buggy then that Black Cat creep." In the middle of digesting this, Zoro released him and Usopp collapsed in a heap.

"So, Luffy does not blame Usopp for getting caught?" Kakashi casually, too deliberately casual, enquired. "Sorry, I've been away and did not ask about what happened over my stint with Mr. Face." Each of the crewmates present fixed Kakashi with a flat look. "That jokes a strong as Zoro's sense of direction."

"Got that right-hay!" the swordsman barked at Usopp. "Regardless," Kakashi kept talking. "What I was around for was Luffy's fury in Cocoyashi village, after the cooked marine shot Nami's sister and you," he nodded to Usopp. "After Naruto announced Kuro had captured you, Luffy was ready to rip a town apart to get you back. Clearly, Luffy does not want you anyone to leave, and he doesn't blame you for getting captured." Slowly, the Hatake knelt beside Usopp, close enough a long nose could brush his mask.

"To shinobi, we often follow certain rules. And those who break the rules are scum. But..." a poignant pause hung in the air, luring in Usopp's attention. "Anyone who abandons their friends. Are lower than scum."

"Those are words that I live by, and I impressed them on every potential Genin assigned to me by the Hokage. Sasuke, Naruto, and Sakura learned them too, and they ran back to aid me against Garp,

against my orders to run. Living up to those rules, so I had to deceive you all so we could escape."

"I made the choice to stay behind," Kakashi owned-up, "and I failed to grasp just how unrelenting a Navy Vice Admiral can be. Now I'm taking steps to learn from it, just like you want to."

"Usopp, you went to Sanji to get stronger. Then found how just training with him won't be a quick fix."

"Think about something else, too. Should you up and leave us, then we sail on to the Grand Line, towards new threats and dangers not only to us but each other. Do you desire to live knowing all of us went further, then died, all while you sat in house unharmed and alone?"

"No!" That immediate answer was the best thing Usopp could do.
"No, uh, I, um-ah..."

"Good." Kakashi was back on his feet and strode for the kitchen.
"We'll have some hungry people here soon. Prep more of the fish. I gotta take a leak." Behind him, Usopp fell flat on his face, and Zoro was mumbling between his teeth. "No need to share that tidbit." Both of them still followed instructions for getting some food prepared.

"Usopp," Zoro called over, fixing his friend was a neutral stare. "Go want to get stronger for this crew. Good, but why go and do it by becoming like Swirl-brow?"

"You're you," The swordsman explained, "and that's important in its own way. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura. All of them ninjas. But each one fights differently from each other. Sasuke's learning how to be a swordsman from me, and it suits him. Naruto might be good with kicks, but Sakura found that style didn't work for her. Instead she went to Gin about learning a new way to fight. Find what works for you and use that in your own way."

The sniper hung his mouth open at Zoro. Something the other guy took with pride. "Maybe we should start looking for a devil-fruit. Or you're good at running away. Did you win these," tapping his own forehead, "from a big-time bounty hunter." Usopp glanced up high and found his specialized goggles.

"I admit, we got a pretty great person here to learn about fighting from," Zoro kept talking. "Back against Arlong's crew, the best swordfight I've... won," Zoro grit his teeth while admitting this, "thanks to sword lessons Kakashi impressed on me. He keeps teaching the Cabin-kids every day, and his name is the guy with a thousand jitsu-or whatever."

Ten minutes later, Kakashi slunk back in on wobbly feet... or they appeared to be. Right away, Usopp dropped what he was doing and marched right up in front of the jonin. "Kakashi!" His lower lip was shaking, and both hands kept furling and unfurling into fists. "Will you teach me the best way I can fight. And help make me stronger for our crew!?"

The boy then bowed his head straight down, waiting to hear an answer.

Morning dawned, and with it a nasty surprise for the pirate crew.

There were Marine sails on the horizon; a large fleet worth and they had already enclosed the bay where the Going Merry remained moored.

End.

[1] = Think about how Sharingan's function to copy jutsu. Then watch Ebisu' explain chakra-spending to Naruto in the Chunin-exam arc.

[2] =I wrote this down before the Netflix Live Action One Piece premiered. The parallel with Zoro catching Helmeppo.... naked was a complete coincidence. But I left it in anyways.

